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**Practicing Sustainability
The Role of Consumer Competence**

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Practicing Sustainability: The Role of Consumer Competence

Cristina Longo

**A thesis submitted for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**University of Bath
School of Management**

October 2014

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Abstract

This thesis contributes to the conceptualisation of consumer competence in the context of pursuing a sustainable consumption lifestyle. It overcomes the limitations of decision-making perspectives, which conceive sustainable consumption as a problem solving exercise based on possessing the relevant information. Drawing on the findings from an investigation into the nature of the competence mobilised by consumers who are committed to the sustainability agenda, a more comprehensive formulation of the concept of competence is advanced. More specifically, competence, as a result of the study, is framed in light of its multifaceted and dynamic nature as well as being a tool mobilised by consumers when attempting to lead their desired life projects. It emerges that they combine three complementary dimensions of consumer competence in varying configurations to pursue their sustainability goals according to their lived experience. First, they judge the marketplace by evaluating product offers and the functioning of the market. Second, they use their abilities to shape the marketplace by employing craftsmanship skills so as to become producers of their own consumption. Third, they mobilise their resources towards the accomplishment of their sustainability objectives. However, it is also elicited that competence has a reverse side that can be counterproductive for the performance of consumption practices, including indecision brought on by information overload and consumers living with the unhappy acknowledgement that they do not always live up to their sustainability ideals.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This thesis contributes towards furthering the understanding of consumer competence in the context of practising a sustainable way of living. The conceptualisation of competence extends beyond the focus on consumer expertise in differentiating among product offers and understanding the functioning of markets (Alba and Hutchinson 1987, 2000; Berg 2007; Berg and Teigen 2009). It addresses its multiple and complex nature. The stance taken here is that consumers pursue their sustainability credo by daily displaying an intricate web of competences to undertake their own interpretation of sustainability.

Achieving sustainability is a societal goal entailing a cultural shift towards the preservation of economic, social and environmental balance, the paths of achievement of which are highly debated (Strong 1997; Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Evans and Jackson 2008; Press and Arnould 2009a; Assadourian 2010; Prothero et al. 2011). Section 1.2 presents how consumer research has tackled the investigation of consumers' engagement in establishing a more sustainable society. In the main, consumers have been conceived as rational decision-makers, who translate their positive attitudes towards sustainability in consumption behaviours, spurred on by the rectification of a knowledge deficit (Parkin et al. 2004). Consequently, spreading sustainable consumption practices has mainly been pursued through sensitising consumers to the sustainability agenda by disseminating information and promoting environmentally-friendly offers (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Jackson 2005; Schaefer and Crane 2005). However, conceiving sustainable consumption as an information processing exercise fails to explain the conflicts, difficulties and compromises experienced when trying to live a sustainable lifestyle (Dolan 2002; Moisander 2007; Connolly and Prothero 2008).

For this study consumer competence is adopted as the theoretical lens to contribute towards the comprehension of the words and deeds of sustainable consumption. For, if consumers are to be ascribed an active role in contributing to the evolution towards a sustainable society, then the exploration and interpretation of their 'toolbox of consumer competence' will shed light on the complexity of complying with the sustainability principles in daily life (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Trentmann 2007), as explained in section 1.3. Section 1.4 presents the structure of the thesis as well as containing the research questions underpinning this project. These are aimed at investigating and interpreting the nature of consumer competences mobilised by consumers so as to conduct a more sustainable lifestyle and how these support them in dealing with the complexity of sustainability. It is contended here that adopting the lens of consumer competence to explain the complexity involved in becoming more sustainable

improves upon much extant research, which has been compromised by engaging with the rational decision making perspective. That is, under this rational lens, the absence of one variable, such as information, is seen as the barrier to conducting sustainable practices and hence, its presence would provide the solution, which begs the question of whether the consumer has the capacity to make use of it. Investigating and interpreting the consumer competence adopted to conduct a sustainable lifestyle would provide an important contribution to the consumer research literature. In particular, it is anticipated that such a study would unpack the benefits of pursuing sustainable consumption as a process of consumer reskilling and hence, help to bring about their reconnection with the production process.

1.2 Research Problem: Unpacking Sustainable Consumption

Western production and consumption practices have been questioned as they give rise to economic, environmental and social disruption (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Hansen and Schrader 1997; Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; Miller 2001; Dolan 2002; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Beck 2006; Assadourian 2010). Western materialist culture has been blamed as a major cause of environmental and social problems, such as the depletion of natural resources, pollution and excessive waste (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; Bucholz 1998; McCullough 2007, 2009; Gabriel and Lang 2008). The establishment of a sustainable society is envisaged as the solution to the limitations of the current dominant social paradigm based upon ever rising levels of production and consumption (Kilbourne et al. 1997; Kilbourne and Carlson 2008; Evans and Abrahamse 2009; Assadourian 2010; Prothero et al. 2010, 2011; Shove 2010).

Disagreement exists on the way to define and channel sustainability, although it is generally agreed that the development of a sustainable society will require the cooperation of governments, public institutions, not-for-profit organisations and consumers (Assadourian 2010; McDonagh et al. 2012). The lattermost are change agents who can contribute to the systematic evolution towards a sustainable society and have been assigned an important role striving towards this destination (Seyfang 2006; Bamossy and Englis 2009; Press and Arnould 2009a, 2009b). Consumer awareness and concern for the sustainability agenda have increased in recent years, even though the translation of positive attitudes towards this agenda into consumption behaviours has had limited success (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Auger and Devinney 2007; Bamossy and Englis 2009; French 2009; Eckhardt et al. 2010).

The strategies adopted to encourage the establishment of more sustainable patterns of consumption have been grounded in the conceptualisation of sustainable consumption as choice, based on information-processing, and in the belief that consumers are rational decision-

makers (Peattie and Collins 2009). With this perspective, consumers are portrayed as ‘sustainability literate people’, who:

“understand the need for change to a sustainable way of doing things, individually and collectively; have sufficient knowledge and skills to decide and act in a way that favours sustainable development; and are able to recognize and reward other people’s decisions and actions that favour sustainable development.” (Parkin et al. 2004, p.9)

These assumptions have led to the implementation of consumer education strategies to spread information on how to lead a more environmentally-conscious lifestyle, which emphasises the benefits of purchasing environmentally-friendly offers, but the lack of widespread engagement with these messages has meant there has been significant change in the implementation of sustainability (Burgess et al.1998; Owens 2000; Hinton and Goodman 2009; Press and Arnould 2009a; Hargreaves 2011). That is, the result of excessive concentration on individual cognitive processes has been to hinder the ability to grasp the overall living experience when following sustainable consumption practices as this has failed to capture their cultural and social nature (Dolan 2002; Spaargaren 2003; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Jackson 2005; Røpke 2009).

Press and Arnould (2009a) made a plea to consumer behaviour researchers to find new ways to study and interpret sustainable consumption so as to overcome the limitations of the current approaches. More specifically, there have been calls within the literature to adopt a more socio-cultural perspective to study sustainability, based on the theorisation of consumption in terms of the role it plays in shaping the life of a person as an individual and as a member of different communities (Dolan 2002; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Soron 2010). Schaefer and Crane (2005) suggested that:

“Putting a cultural/social lens on consumption opens up different, more diverse, and potentially richer ways of thinking about sustainability albeit more challenging ones.”
(p.85)

This research is aimed at responding to this call to apply a socio-cultural perspective to the study of sustainability, by shedding light on how it can be achieved within the dynamics of everyday life and thus contribute new knowledge. Adopting sustainable consumption entails a transformation of daily routines and thus, does not only depend upon cognitive deliberation. Even although providing information on sustainability can influence the formation of intentions and attitudes, it does not exert a major impact upon environmental and contextual factors (Hobson 2003; Jackson 2005; Verplanken and Wood 2006; Moraes et al. 2012). Consequently,

a cultural perspective has been considered to be a more adequate analytical framework in studies of sustainable consumption as it is mainly focused upon the meanings attributed by consumers to their interpretation and experience of sustainability (Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; Dolan 2002; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Peattie and Peattie 2009; Eckhardt et al. 2010).

1.3 Research Angle: Consumer Competence

Consumption practices are increasingly being seen as inseparable from what is in the public interest (Seyfang 2005, 2006; Jubas 2007; Trentmann 2007) and therefore:

“green consumption behaviors must be understood within the context of a process of increasing individualization, where consumers can find ways to feel both responsible and empowered in dealing with environmental risks to both the wider global planet and themselves.” (Bamossy and Englis 2009, p.1)

Consumers are critical agents for the development of society and its trajectories, that is, the competence that they display in their consumption practices influences society itself (Bazerman 2001; Berg 2007). This research enters the debate in consumer research about sustainability and contributes by unpacking how the process of individualisation occurs by furthering the comprehension of how consumers live sustainability in terms of the competence that they mobilise to practice such a lifestyle. Moreover, studying the competence activated by consumers to perform sustainable consumption is a valuable lens for comprehending how they face the complexity of sustainability in a changing and evolving marketplace (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Pavlova 2005; Jaffe and Gertler 2006). Consumer competence as a means to drive the change towards a sustainable society has been discussed in terms of questioning whether consumers do or do not have the skills to act sustainably (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Pavlova 2005; Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Barbat 2009). Regarding which, Sennett (2008, p.12) pointed to the personal and societal need for consumers to become “good craftsmen of the environment” and this thesis has the goal of exploring and analysing the skills and abilities required to “inhabit sustainable environments”.

Top-down educational initiatives have had the goal of sensitising consumers towards the ways of behaving sustainably (Leonard- Barton 1981; Bonnett 2002; Bowers 2002; Scott and Gough 2006; Capra 2007; Vare and Scott 2007). Conceiving sustainable consumption as a problem-solving exercise to be pursued through information-processing (Dolan 2002; Hobson 2003; Schaefer and Crane 2005) entails considering consumer knowledge of environmentally-friendly offers as the main competency to act sustainably (Schaefer and Crane 2005, p.79). Lacking consumer knowledge has, hence, been identified as a barrier to translating positive attitudes

towards sustainability into behaviours (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002; Tanner and Wölting 2003; Thøgersen 2005; Vermeir and Verbeke 2006). However, focusing upon consumer knowledge is limiting, for possessing it does not necessarily lead to sustainable practice, because of consumer confusion and scepticism originating from information overload as well as contradictory commercial messages (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Moisander 2007; Williams and Dair 2007; Young et al. 2010). Moreover, concentrating on consumer knowledge involves focusing only upon choosing among different ethical offers rather than taking account of the overall experience of conducting a sustainable lifestyle.

Competence has been considered in motivational terms as a lever for instigating the adoption of a sustainable lifestyle (De Young 2000, 2003; Valor 2008), whereby consumers are inclined to develop abilities to attempt to act effectively, if they want to participate in its materialisation (De Young 2000, 2003; Valor 2008). In line with this argument, the concept of perceived behavioural control has appeared in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1991) to signify people's faith in their ability to accomplish a particular behaviour. However, this concept represents a subjective perception of the capacity to act and does not necessarily reflect the actual behavioural control that consumers might exert in reality, for as stated by Carrington et al. (2010):

“To date, this concept has yet to be further developed or refined. In addition, the transition between PBC and ABC (i.e. when and how one's PBC is transformed into one's ABC in a given situation) is not currently understood. Therefore, we see the infancy of ABC within the literature as a limitation of the conceptual model, and encourage further conceptual research regarding this construct.” (p.155)

This research addresses this literature gap by empirically investigating the importance and nature of competences adopted by consumers within their own interpretation of sustainability in their daily lives. Studies adopting the Theory of Planned Behaviour have reflected upon the influence that the enjoyment and perception to be competent exert on the willingness to implement the sustainable behaviours, but have not been directed towards investigating what competences are actually important for consumers to possess when they aspire to achieve sustainability.

Moreover, decision making models are based upon the argument that perceiving to possess the capacity to act will automatically translate into the desired behaviour, thereby overlooking the complexity of undertaking sustainability within the competing demands and barriers experienced in consumers' everyday lives. Furthermore, the 'sustainable upbringing' offered by

the educational system has been more focused on abstract knowledge rather than building up skills useful for household and practical daily living (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Pavlova 2005).

The need to take into account the overall contextual, contrasting and practical aspects to live sustainability is supported by Trentmann (2007), who contended that:

“how the skills necessary for a practice are performed, acquired, contested and regulated, and how they evolve over time is worth studying and can give insight into how personal, emotional, technical and institutional factors are integrated in consumption.” (Trentmann 2007, p.155)

Studying competence at the individual level should be based on the understanding of the relationship with the structure and, in turn the effects that the latter has on the former. That is, competence is evolutionary, for consumers need to keep updated on the changes of the marketplace (i.e. technology, infrastructure, regulation) in order to be able to decode, decipher, and discern its development (Jaffe and Gertler 2006). Consumer competence has, therefore, a dynamic nature as it is the result of the interaction of consumers with public and commercial organisations as well as due to the influence of infrastructures (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Berg 2007; Lamine 2008).

However, the interaction between consumers and the marketplace does not necessarily lead to an improvement in the former's abilities and can trigger a process of consumer deskilling (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Berg 2007; Lamine 2008), which is the loss of their capacity to be effective stakeholders in consumption and production (Sherry 1984; McDonagh and Prothero 2005; Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Gabriel and Lang 2008; Lamine 2008). Deskilled consumers are individuals who, even though they cherish material possessions and the value attached to them, experience a sense of alienation from the essence of the products (Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Gabriel and Lang 2008). Adopting competence as the lens of analysis helps to shed light on the difficulties experienced by consumers when trying to lead a sustainable lifestyle at a time when there is the increased threat of deskilling being exerted by the marketplace.

Individuals are deskilled because they experience a disconnection from production owing to a progressive decrease in their understanding of how its processes take place (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Moraes et al. 2010, 2012). That is, they are increasingly separated from the origins of the products by having only vague ideas regarding the processes

of transformation and distribution that the products are subjected to through the supply chain. They have become increasingly exposed to romanticised images of production sites as depicted in corporate campaigns or through slick packaging and hence have difficulties in acquiring accurate information in order to take complex decisions successfully (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Jaffe and Gertler 2006). The increasing expansion of global food chains is one of the causes of consumer disconnectedness and disempowerment, because it involves greater distancing of consumers from the land and, hence, engenders their ignorance of product origins, whilst at the same time increasing the dependence of local farmers on retailers' chains (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007, p.140).

In sum, the effect of consumer estrangement from production on consumption habits extends the difficulties that they experience when trying to live a more sustainable lifestyle and can deepen further their feelings of being deskilled (Jaffe and Gertler 2006). Consumers are, furthermore, deskilled because they lead a time-poor existence that is supported more by an abstract knowledge rather than a practically applied one (Brewis and Gavin 2005; McDonagh and Prothero 2005; Jaffe and Gertler 2006). Consequently, in addition to the difficulties they face in judging the ethical and green nature of offers and a widespread lack of awareness of the consequences of their consumption acts, they have increasingly lost skills that previous generations were able to draw upon to manage their lives (Jaffe and Gertler 2006, p.154).

This gradual loss of household and non-commoditised skills has led to a decreasing self-reliance, because of the emergence of individual and family patterns of daily life that are more and more dependent on the marketplace (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Bowers 2002; Pavlova 2005). Analysing consumer deskilling in food consumption terms, for example, reveals an increasing loss of competence to cook from scratch with a consequent reliance on the use of readymade food. In addition, the public is largely unaware of the effects that certain food practices exert on the environment, they lack practical knowledge regarding food storage and the competence to adopt foods in ways other than according to their nutritional functions, has been increasingly lost (Brewis and Gavin 2005; McDonagh and Prothero 2005; Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Cole et al. 2009). The lower use of manual skills is also down to a scarcity of time (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Reisch 2001; Brewis and Gavin 2005), whereby:

“it could also be argued that time horizons have shortened in our throw-away, profit-driven, individualistic, consumer society, which is focused on immediate gratification.” (Passerini, 1998, p.68)

Finally, technology is playing a predominant role in consumer deskilling as electrical appliances and machines are being substituted for consumers to deliver everyday consumption practices (Sherry 1984; Bucholz 1998; Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Lamine 2008; Truninger 2011). Moreover, transformations in technology have expanded the variety of goods available and raised the rate of obsolescence through rapid innovation (Bucholz 1998). Further, machines have been replacing human skills and technology is flourishing in producing new goods that act as supporters of this loss of competence, which is bringing about a change in the structure of the activities within the household, whereby family members outsource to satisfy many of their needs (Sherry 1984; Jaffe and Gertler 2006). Adopting consumer competence as the perspective of analysis allows for an insightful investigation into consumers' reactions to the spread of deskilling. That is, focusing on competence will provide deeper understanding of the ways those consumers willing to contribute to the materialisation of a more sustainable society are reacting to a gradual loss of self-reliance and their relation with the use of resources. The next section 1.4 presents an overview of the structure and contents of this thesis and the research questions guiding the study.

1.4 The Structure: The Pieces of the Puzzle

This thesis is aimed at contributing towards understanding the ways sustainability is performed by focusing upon the exploration and interpretation of the consumer competence adopted for its implementation.

In chapter 2, after presenting the systemic nature of the sustainability challenge, attention is directed towards unveiling the current knowledge on sustainable consumption. The rational-decision making perspective has attributed crucial importance to information as supporting the engagement in sustainable behaviours (Schahn and Olzer 1990; Thøgersen 1994; Olander and Thøgersen 1995). Effecting sustainable practices is, however, a difficult path to follow in view of the compromises and barriers experienced when attempting to live sustainably (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Press and Arnould 2009b; Moraes et al. 2012). Adopting the lens of consumer competence favours the analysis and interpretation of the complexity of sustainable consumption and chapter 3 is dedicated to reviewing its current conceptualisations. The concept of product expertise (Alba and Hutchinson 1987) has originated the major stream of conceiving consumer competence as referring to the capacity to purchase efficiently (Berg 2007; Nancarrow et al. 2008; Garnier and Macdonald 2009). Consequently, it has been theorised that collaboration between those with consumer competence and marketers can help to improve the quality and attractiveness of products (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Bonsu and Darmody 2008; Zwick et al. 2008), especially when consumers have developed a specific and high technical knowledge of a particular brand. Finally, a few consumer research studies have

focused upon consumer competence as a tool adopted to become producers of specific consumption activities, such as do-it-yourself (Campbell 2005; Fabris 2008; Cova and Cova 2012).

The thesis aims to shed light on the gap between the responsibility attributed to consumers wanting to be part of the sustainability agenda and their actual ability to do so (Stainfield and Stainfield 1980). By exploring and interpreting the competence displayed by them when attempting to live a sustainable lifestyle, this work addresses a research area that is still under-theorised in consumer studies (Cova et al. 2006; Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Carù and Cova 2011). The two research questions, explained in detail in chapter 4, underlying this study are:

Research question 1: “What competences do consumers mobilise to engage in sustainable consumption?”

Research question 2: “By mobilising these competences, how do consumers react to the complexity of sustainability?”

To address these research questions, an interpretive study has been conducted, with consumption being conceived in light of its socio-cultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects by adhering to Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007). Moreover, as explained in chapter 5, in order to grasp the nature of consumer competence within the complexity involved when trying to lead a sustainable lifestyle, interpretivism is the paradigmatic home for this study, because it engages with the experiences lived by consumers (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982) and aims at uncovering the sense attributed by people to their life world (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). In addition, hermeneutics (Arnold and Fischer 1994; Thompson 1997) has been adopted to analyse phenomenological interviews (McCracken 1988; Moisander et al. 2009) conducted with consumers who are willingly engaging in a sustainable way of life.

The interviewees have been purposefully sampled (Patton 1990) within the boundaries of a local environmental organisation, Transition Bath, whose scope is to sensitise and support the local community to become more sustainable. The subculture of Transition Bath belongs to the Transition Movement (Semal 2008; Seyfang 2009; Semal and Szuba 2010), which originated in 1995 in Ireland and since then has developed into a network of grassroots initiatives with goal of effecting sustainability principles for the benefit of the community. Participant observation has been undertaken at events and workshops organised under the umbrella name of Transition Bath in order to grasp the nature of competence displayed when performing sustainability

practices. Transition Bath has proved to be a rich research site for recruiting people at different stages of involvement and expertise in the sustainability agenda. In contrast to other investigations that have concentrated upon understanding the functioning of particular subcultures, like Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Press and Arnould 2011) and New Consumption Communities (NCC) (Moraes et al. 2010, 2012), this thesis focuses on investigating what it means to be a competent consumer when conducting everyday sustainable consumption practices.

Chapters 6 and 7, respectively, address the two research questions previously presented. Chapter 6 sheds light on the nature of the consumer competence acquired in realising sustainability and thus, helps to unpack the multiple faceted nature of this concept. In addition, deeper understanding of consumer competence in sustainability terms, helps to illuminate the basis on which consumers cast their 'votes' in the marketplace whilst aiming to achieve sustainable practices (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Shaw et al. 2006; Shaw 2007; Trentmann 2007). Furthermore, it extends the conceptualisation of consumer competence beyond abstract knowledge to include consideration of the analysis of the requirement for the manual art to be sustainable. Confirming, in this way, a need for the public audience to develop craft knowledge to be able to attempt to live sustainably fully and actively contribute to the minimisation of the wasteful use of resources (Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Pavlova 2005). Finally, the analysis of the findings in chapter 6 contributes to theoretically advancing the understanding of the difference between competence and resource, the terms of which in the consumer behaviour literature are usually overlapping, by revealing the importance of having expertise when faced with the adoption and combination of the resources available to consumers.

Chapter 7 discusses the role played by consumer competence when facing the complexity of living sustainably. It emerges that they have a tendency to share their competence with others to spread sustainability principles and by using their accumulated knowledge and skills they are better equipped to face the challenges and doubts arising due to everyday conflicting demands and duties. Notably, the outcomes of the analysis of the informants' experiences challenge the common argument, whereby possessing competence supports the performance of a practice, for it can also act as a barrier to the unfettered accomplishment of sustainability. It turns out that consumers feel overwhelmed by the competing information on the right thing to do and are frustrated by the perceived impossibility of conducting a particular sustainable practice, because of the limitations of the current infrastructure. Consequently, these findings enrich the current debate on the barriers to becoming sustainable (Tanner and Wölfling 2003; Vermeir and Verbeke 2006; Press and Arnould 2009b).

Chapter 8 discusses the main contributions that this research makes to further the conceptualisation of consumer competence and hence, the debate on sustainability. The overarching contribution that my thesis makes is the development of an understanding of the concept of consumer competence beyond its actual cognitive definition by providing insights regarding the toolbox adopted by consumers when practising sustainable consumption. Beyond supporting consumers to take efficient purchasing decisions, consumer competence is conceived in terms of a tool for consumers to lead their daily lives and pursue their life goals. In this way, the thesis extends the understanding of prosumerism¹ (Toffler 1980; Kotler 1986; Fabris 2008; Cova and Cova 2012) as the improvement of consumer competence turns consumers into prosumers not only of their own consumption, but also of their life projects. That is, exploring and interpreting consumer competence represents a useful lens to conceptualise the dynamic relationship between production and consumption as the boundaries between the two are becoming increasingly blurred, for this can be seen as a way to judge the marketplace as well as to shape it. Performing sustainable consumption is favoured by an increase in consumer knowledge of the functioning of products, of the production processes and consumer rapprochement with the production site (Selfa and Qazi 2005; Ilbery and Maye 2007).

In addition, this work contributes to the debate about the compromises and challenges encountered when implementing sustainable consumption (Moisander 2007; Connolly and Prothero 2008) by highlighting the reverse side of consumer competence as a barrier to achieving sustainability. In effect, in this thesis the assumption that competence is automatically endowed with a positive nature is questioned and only a few prior research studies have highlighted the negative side of consumer competence (Alba and Hutchinson 2000; Carù and Cova 2011). Regarding which, consumers' over evaluation of their own level of competence may lead them into believing they possess a higher degree of knowledge than they do (knowledge calibration) and hence, make inefficient purchasing decisions (Alba and Hutchinson 2000). Moreover, consumer competence can represent a threat for marketers, for when they feel exploited by the offer side or ignored they may mobilise their competences contrariwise to producers' wishes (Carù and Cova 2011). Interpretation of the findings will allow for greater understanding of this under-researched area and it emerges that the desire to improve sustainable practice on a constant basis may be accompanied by a state of indecision and failure owing to the overwhelming amount of the alternative proposed practices available. Therefore, in depth knowledge of the different alternatives does not necessarily go hand in hand with understanding those that support sustainability principles and those that do not, with the

¹ Prosumerism is a neologism resulting from the combination of the terms producer and consumer, which was coined by Toffler in 1980. It refers to consumption experiences where the consumer is also actively engaged in the process of design and craft of the he experience itself. Prosumerism will be explained in depth in section 3.5.

result being that consumers can end up in a state of inertia. The unveiled multifaceted nature of consumer competence thus, brings into question the adoption of a decision making perspective overlooking the nuances of its mobilisation. In sum, being competent in attempting to pursue sustainability ideals has been revealed to be highly complex and, as such, it cannot be understood through deterministic cause-effect relationships between variables.

Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by presenting the limitations, implications and future research avenues from this study. The results are limited, as the proposed intricate web of competences has been investigated within the complex nature of sustainability based upon the point of view of consumers.

1.5 Conclusion

This thesis contributes to understanding the “competences of mind, hands, and heart” (Capra 2007, p.9) that support consumers in acting as effective practitioners of sustainability. Consumer competence is, therefore, a valuable lens for examining sustainable consumption, representing one of the panaceas of marketing, which Cova et al. (2006) defined as alternatives to the common and generally accepted Kotlerian marketing perspective. That is, panaceas, like anti-marketing, knowledge marketing and solution marketing, share a common focus on consumer competence as a basis for interaction, dialogue and rebalancing between consumers and producers (ibid). Exploring and interpreting the multifaceted nature of consumer competence helps in understanding the ways consumers react to contextual and paradigmatic changes through the development and modification of their knowledge and skills. Moreover, by highlighting the overlaps existing between consumption and production, the focus on consumer competence assists in uncovering the systemic nature of the collaboration among the different societal agents aimed at establishing a sustainable society where sharing, access and collaboration have greater importance than materialistic attachment to physical possessions.

In keeping with Calder and Tybout’s tautological definition of consumer research as a means to create knowledge about consumer behaviour (1987), extending the conceptualisation of consumer competence facilitates in the key goal of such research - to create theoretical knowledge that expands understanding about the consumer. Despite the critical importance of comprehending consumer competence and the research calls to define it, this area is still underdeveloped (Cova et al. 2006; Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Carù and Cova 2011), hence this thesis has the aim of bridging this gap in the existing knowledge.

2 SUSTAINABILITY: A NEW CONSUMPTION PARADIGM

2.1 Introduction

Mass standardised methods of production and distribution are considered accomplices of Western consumerist consumption patterns in the affliction of environmental and social problems, such as exploitation and damage of natural resources (Heiskanen, and Pantzar 1997; Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Evans and Abrahamse 2009; Peattie and Collins 2009; Assadourian 2010; Prothero et al. 2010, 2011; Shove 2010). Accomplishing sustainability has been envisioned to be the solution to these problems to be achieved through the collaboration of different stakeholders (i.e. public institutions, companies, not for profit organisations and consumers) by preserving resources to benefit the environment and current/future generations (Kilbourne et al. 1997; Iyer 1999; Dolan 2002; Spaargaren 2003; Söderbaum 2007; McDonagh et al. 2012).

The term ‘sustainability’ has been much debated because of its constant evolution, both in terms of how it is conceptualised and represented (Gladwin et al. 1995; Dobson 1996; Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; Lumley and Armstrong 2004; Fergus and Rowney 2005; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Söderbaum 2007; Dimitrov 2010). This chapter discusses the complex nature of sustainability (section 2.2) and specifically focuses upon the investigation of sustainable consumption (section 2.3), which entails consumers altering and/or reducing their consumption levels (Shaw and Newholm 2002; McDonald et al. 2006; Evans 2011). The motives behind consumers’ commitment to the sustainability agenda are various and their interconnections are explained in section 2.4. Consumers undertake sustainable practices to contribute to minimising waste and in so doing wish to demonstrate their citizenship by feeling part of a community (Meredyth 1997; McGregor 2002; Beck 2006; Seyfang 2006; Shaw 2007). Pursuing sustainability is meaningful for consumers, also, because it represents a path enabling them to experience an alternative sense of pleasure (De Young 2000; Soper 2007, 2008, 2013; Autio et al. 2009; Moraes et al. 2010, 2012; McDonagh et al. 2012). In sum, the willingness to try to perform sustainable consumption is motivated by a complex web of different reasons driven by the desire to protect the environment and distant others as well as to obtain a personal enhancement.

Consumers’ motivations to become sustainable have been the object of a dynamic debate, but the real challenge is represented by understanding how these motivations are materialised. The dilemma still lies in unpacking the ways consumers actually undertake sustainability and deal with the difficulties associated with it. Section 2.5 reviews the current contributions regarding the ways consumers experience sustainable consumption. In respect of which, a rational

decision making perspective has been mainly adopted to explain the actualisation of sustainability by defining it as an information processing exercise where sequential steps result in the translation of attitudes into behaviours (Pieters 1991; Thøgersen 1994; Olander and Thøgersen 1995). That is, consumers have been portrayed as rational decision-makers who engage in sustainability, following a problem-solving logic and basing their consumption decisions upon the information they possess about commercial offers (Burgess et al. 1998; Owens 2000). However, the major role attributed to information and the aforementioned linearity envisioned within the succession of the different variables underpinning these models, within the decision making tradition, present limitations in capturing the compromises and dilemmas faced when attempting to support a sustainable lifestyle (Dolan 2002; Hobson 2003; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Bartiaux 2008). Finally, section 2.6 concludes the chapter by presenting the benefits of adopting consumer competence as the lens to investigate consumer experiences in pursuing sustainability ideals. Focusing on consumer competence favours the exploration and interpretation of the strategies adopted by consumers towards sustainable behaviour as well as overcoming the limitations of the decision making approach.

2.2 Sustainability: A Societal Challenge

Today, Western society is labelled as the risk society because it is suffering from the consequences of the transformations that it itself has provoked, like the damaging environmental effects caused by an era of growing industrialisation (Beck 1986, 2006). The society of scarcity, which was characterised by a problem of redistribution of wealth, has evolved into a risk society, whose underlying problem is the redistribution of this risk (Beck 1986). The process of modernization has been supported by the development of science and technology that have not only generated growth, but have also triggered the existence of risks to be shared by different stakeholders, including individuals, public institutions, corporations (Beck 1986). Each stakeholder is, thus, globally experiencing these risks both by contributing to their creation and by being subjected to them.

The current risk society is based on a dominant social paradigm², whose economic, technological and political dimensions are characterised by pitfalls that call for an evolution of the paradigm itself (Kilbourne et al. 1997, 2009; Kilbourne 1998; Kilbourne and Carlson 2008). Economically this dominant social paradigm is based on the necessity for continuous economic

² A paradigm is a system of beliefs, values and habits that acts as a lens through which the individuals perceive and interpret the world they live in and that legitimises and justifies the institutions of society and the paths to attain progress (Kilbourne et al. 1997; Kilbourne 1998; Kilbourne and Carlson 2008; Kilbourne et al. 2009).

growth to maintain the levels of profitability and the accumulation of capital, which entails an uneven distribution of resources and wealth (Kilbourne et al. 1997). Technology is at the basis of material progress aimed at enabling the pace of production speed to remain high, whilst at the same time representing a source of risks brought about through the technology itself - in this way causing a continuous vicious circle (Kilbourne et al. 1997, 2009; Kilbourne 1998; Kilbourne and Carlson 2008). Science and technology are, in fact, both a blessing and a curse of the current dominant paradigm (Beck 1986, 2006). The political dimension is strongly linked with the economic and technological ones in that it too is involved in the engagement with keeping the status quo of perpetuating growth, which has led to the emergence of environmental degradation and social inequities (Kilbourne et al. 1997, 2009).

The nature of societal risks was officially highlighted by the Independent Commission on International Development Issues, chaired by Willy Brandt, at the beginning of the 1980s. In the reports 'North-South: A Programme for Survival' (1980) and 'Common Crisis North - South: Cooperation for World Recovery' (1983), the Brandt Commission presented an overview of the risks afflicting society (i.e. decrease in usable fresh water, threats to biodiversity) (Fergus and Rowney 2005). Consequently, the Brandt Commission called for global cooperation to value, preserve, and improve the human as well as the environmental quality of life. Sustainability has been envisioned to be the solution to the consequences of the risk society, thereby challenging the current dominant social paradigm (Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; Kilbourne et al. 1997; Buchholz 1998; Iyer 1999; Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Cohen 2006; Kilbourne and Carlson 2008; Prothero et al. 2010). The term sustainable development, akin to sustainability, was spread through the dissemination of the report *Our Common Future*, widely known as the Brundtland Report, published by the World Commission on Environment and Development. This report's description of sustainable development has generally been accepted as the reference definition for sustainability, because it encapsulates its main aspects, such as preservation of resources and inter-intra generational dependency. Sustainable development is conceived to be:

“development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

- the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.” (Brundtland Report 1987, p.41)

Attention to preserving and securing resources is the underlying basis of sustainable practices (Shapiro 1978; Gladwin et al. 1995; Lumley and Armstrong 2004; Söderbaum 2007). Preserving and taking care of human and natural resources facilitates sustainability by guaranteeing a sense of security; it allows for aspirations of a better quality of life and a safer existence for current and future generations by attempting to prevent negative circumstances (Gladwin et al. 1995; Lumley and Armstrong 2004; Söderbaum 2007). This ethos is reflected in Shapiro's proposal (1978) for a conserver society, whose goal is the minimisation of waste in production and consumption, by decreasing the use of resources through efficiency maximisation, and the improvement of the degree of self-reliance.

Sustainability entails a sense of comprehensiveness within time, space and the materiality of the world, because of the interconnections and interdependencies occurring between and within generations (Gladwin et al. 1995; Passerini 1998; Collard 2000, 2001; Markandya and Mason 2000; McGregor et al. 2000; Lumley and Armstrong 2004; Söderbaum 2007). The path to pursue sustainable development greatly depends upon guaranteeing intergenerational and intra generational equality, as the third principle of the Report of the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development suggested (1992). That is, fairness and equity are considered as the guiding principles for the redistribution of resources so that new generations can continue to benefit from the same resources at the disposal of the past and present generations.

The intergenerational and intra generational transfer of resources involves both rights and obligations, being defined as an intergenerational bargain (McGregor et al. 2000; Collard 2000, 2001; Markandya and Mason 2000). That is, affection or duty, strategic self-interest and reciprocity are the key factors that drive the generational bargain and transfer (Collard 2001), which is based upon an ecological, social, and economic interdependence (Gladwin et al. 1995).

The complexity of sustainability has resulted in varying interpretations regarding its actualisation (Gladwin et al. 1995; Dobson 1996; Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; Lumley and Armstrong 2004; Fergus and Rowney 2005; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Söderbaum 2007; Dimitrov 2010). The shift to sustainability entails a cultural move involving changes in values, norms and processes, achieved through practices that preserve and respect the resources of the planet (Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Evans and Jackson 2008; Assadourian 2010; Prothero et al. 2011). This requires a progressive societal transformation involving the questioning habits that have become entrenched at both the household and organisational levels (Brundtland Report 1987; Dimitrov 2010).

That is:

“sustainability from this viewpoint becomes a continuous learning process of creating and testing so that new knowledge is combined and redeveloped and recombined.”
(Dimitrov 2010, p.6)

Achieving sustainability should be a societal goal and as such will require the commitment and engagement of all the different stakeholders, including consumers, business, not for profit organisations and public institutions (Kilbourne et al. 1997; Iyer 1999; Dolan 2002; Spaargaren 2003; Söderbaum 2007; McDonagh et al. 2012). Considering, as explained above, that both production and consumption are equally engaged in the process of giving rise to the risk society and sustaining the dominant social paradigm, both producers and consumers need to be engaged in changing habits geared towards ensuring that the principles of sustainability materialise (Iyer 1999; Söderbaum 2007; McDonagh et al. 2012). In line with the position taken by Peattie and Crane (2005), the three adjectives ‘environmental’, ‘green’ and ‘sustainable’ are used throughout this thesis to signify efforts conducted by stakeholders towards practising sustainability.

Studying consumers’ commitment to and engagement with the sustainable agenda is the focus of this thesis. Whilst acknowledging the systemic nature of sustainability, the main focus is on unpacking the lived experience of consumers who attribute importance to the sustainability cause and who try to accomplish their own interpretation of the concept whilst conducting their daily lives. Section 2.3 that follows contains a review of the literature on the concept of sustainable consumption, the debates regarding which generally revolve around whether it should entail maintained and/or reduced levels of consumption.

2.3 Sustainable Consumption: A Complex Path to Be Walked

The link between sustainability and consumption is complex. In fact, associating the adjective sustainable to the noun consumption can be even considered to be an oxymoron as Western consumerist consumption patterns represent one of the causes of environmental and social problems (Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Peattie and Collins 2009). The summit organised by the UN Council for Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 marked the official public exposure of current Western consumerist consumption levels as unsustainable (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; Princen 1999; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Seyfang 2005; Evans 2011). Escalation of consumption levels has provoked a constant rise in waste that has been produced by the development of a high number of throw-away products. The result being that consumerist society has become equivalent to a

throw-away society (Princen 1999; McCullough 2007, 2009). To address this, Western industrialised countries have been called upon to decrease their consumption levels by redirecting current consumer practices towards less resource intensive ones (Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; OECD 2002; Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Evans 2011).

However, such change is dependent upon a joint transformation of both production and consumption processes. As such sustainable consumption has been defined as:

“the use of goods and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations.” (Norwegian Ministry of Environment 1994)

The crucial role played by consumption in causing environmental disruption and the increase in waste is such that consumers have been called upon to assume their responsibility for the resolution of environmental problems (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Halkier 1999; Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Söderbaum 2007). This ascribed consumer responsibility reflects demands for them to act responsibly and behave as citizens whilst carrying out their role as consumers (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Halkier 1999; McGregor 1999, 2002; Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Seyfang 2005, 2006; Shaw et al. 2006; Söderbaum 2007; Shaw and Black 2009).

As consumer citizens, individuals not only pursue the fulfilment of their own desires within the phases of the wheel of consumption, but they also usually take account of societal wellbeing. The apparent paradoxical and complicated nature of consumer citizenship (Jubas 2007; Soper 2007; Trentmann 2007) lies in the fact that the same person who, with the other societal stakeholders, contributes to environmental, economic and social problems is she/he who, as a citizen, is called upon to try to solve the problems she/he has created (Soper 2007). The boundaries between consumption and citizenship are increasingly becoming blurred because of the importance attributed to consumption in the Western society, both at the private and public levels. More specifically, citizenship impacts on public life in the same way that consumer behaviour affects the nature of the marketplace and because private and public are more and more interlinked, consumption becomes a viable option to express citizenship (McGregor 2002; Shaw et al. 2006; Trentmann 2007). Practices like buycotting or boycotting represent an attempt by consumers to influence society's evolution (Shaw et al. 2006; Trentmann 2007). In this way, acts of purchasing acquire a larger significance that goes beyond the benefit for the single

consumer and reflects a sense of belonging to a larger community (Beck 2006; Seyfang 2006; Shaw 2007).

When politics enters consumption, the marketplace becomes an arena where consumers cast their votes to support manufacturers and retailers whose proposals match their own moral ideals and values (McGregor 1999, 2002; Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Harrison et al. 2005; Seyfang 2005; Shaw et al. 2006; Soper 2007; Trentmann 2007; Shaw and Black 2009). Such voting can be achieved through boycotting and/or boycotting. These behaviours represent consumers' support for the good of the community and their evaluation of the effects of their purchasing beyond personal interests in that they take into account the impact on others and on the environment (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Dickinson and Carsky, 2005; Shaw et al. 2006; Shaw 2007; Trentmann 2007). Buying Fair Trade products and/or refusing to purchase brands that have been involved in scandals related to sweatshop production, represents a way for consumers to demonstrate their participation as members of society by integrating their private and public lives (Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Seyfang 2005; Shaw et al. 2006; Trentmann 2007). Popular examples of famous boycotting campaigns have been the ones organised against Nestlé, because of its aggressive marketing of breast milk substitutes, and against Gap in view of accusations in relation to its use of sweatshop labour (Shaw et al. 2006). In this way, voting represents a manifestation of consumer environmental activism through which consumers denounce perceived unfairness of the marketplace and act as stakeholders for the common good, together with companies and public institutions (Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Seyfang 2005; Shaw and Black 2009).

Consumer activism can also be seen through demonstrations, such as signing petitions and/or letter writing to express opposition towards a corporate strategy (Shaw and Black 2009). As a result, consumers perceive that their purchasing choices represent a voice in the marketplace and so feel empowered by their voting decisions (Shaw et al. 2006; Shaw and Black 2009). Consumers are reassured by feeling that their consumption votes gain power as part of a collective effort conducted by an imaginary consumer community, whose members work together to enact change (Shaw and Clarke 1999; Shaw 2007).

Conceptualising the efforts of consumers who attempt to perform a more sustainable way of living through the notions of consumer citizenship and consumer voting portrays consumers as sovereign. Companies have taken advantage of the process of 'greening' consumer sovereignty through expanding their brands by introducing environmentally-friendly extensions and/or by relying on the use of materials that are sustainably sourced (Shaw and Black 2009, p.391). With this perspective, new product launches and new opening of store branches not only reflect

corporate plans and competitive tactics, but also consumer sovereignty as their demands shape the future evolution of the market system by influencing production trends (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Shaw et al. 2006; Shaw and Black 2009).

Consumer citizenship, voting and sovereignty are based upon the assumption that they are willing and have the power to make a change. Despite helping in the clarification of the materialisation of sustainability in purchasing acts, these concepts are limited in their ability to grasp the complexity of sustainable consumption (Shaw and Clarke 1999; Soper 2007; Shaw and Black 2009; Devinney et al. 2010). Consumers are not necessarily willing to engage in sustainable practices and even those who are actively living a more-sustainable way of life are overwhelmed with doubts with regards to how to face the challenges in order to maintain their paths towards sustainability (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Devinney et al. 2010).

According to Devinney et al. (2010), the ethical consumer is a myth:

“in that s/he is an idealization of what consumers should be doing to be proper members of society. Unlike the attainable her, this ethical consumer is the ideal to which we can aspire, and represents a level of behaviour that we can achieve.”
(Devinney et al. 2010, p.4)

Producers and consumers act in conditions of imperfect information and, consequently, the latter's capacity for sovereignty is challenged (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Shaw and Black 2009). It is difficult for consumers to possess all the information necessary to vote; confusion may be caused by the variety of the information at their disposal and may be complicated by the contradictory messages distributed by the different sources of information available (Shaw and Black 2009; Devinney et al. 2010). Producers, on the other hand, need time to grasp, understand and act upon the votes coming from the demand side (Shaw and Black 2009). Hansen and Schrader (1997, p.452) emphasised that the exercise of consumer sovereignty is restricted by: inadequate supply adjustment, imperfect choice due to budget constraint and the influence of marketing.

Shaw and Black (2009) have questioned the strength and efficacy of the impact of consumer voting as a political form of encouraging social change towards sustainability, despite it being a demonstration of the motivation for them to try to participate responsibly in the marketplace arena. This is because consumer voting and consumer sovereignty are concerned with maintaining current levels of consumption, rather than viewing sustainability in terms of the reduction of consumption levels (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Shaw and Clarke 1999; Shaw and

Black 2009; Devinney et al. 2010). In reality, sustainable consumption could be pursued through alternative modes of consumption that maintain current consumption levels or reduce them, which may progress in parallel or separately (Shaw and Newholm 2002; Connolly and Prothero 2008; Cherrier et al. 2012). Current contributions on the alternative ways to lead a sustainable living are discussed in depth in the following subsection.

2.3.1 Sustainable Living: Maintained and Reduced Levels of Consumption

Sustainable consumption has been investigated in the consumer research literature either as an adaptation of consumption practices within the same level of overall consumption or in terms of a reduction. A rich terminology has been adopted to define these two ways of carrying out sustainability. ‘Mainstream sustainable consumption’ (Seyfang 2005, 2006), ‘efficient consumption as a weak version of sustainable consumption’ (Fucks and Lorek 2005), ‘maintained levels of consumption’ (Shaw and Newholm 2002) and ‘alternative consumption’ (Cherrier et al. 2012) are all concepts referring to a commitment to the sustainability cause by preserving the same level. Experiencing sustainability through reducing consumption has been termed ‘reduced consumption’ (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Shaw and Newholm 2002; Cherrier et al. 2012), ‘reduction in consumption levels as strong sustainable consumption’ (Fucks and Lorek 2005), ‘non-consumption’ (McDonagh et al. 2012) and ‘downshifting’ (Shankar et al. 2006; Cherrier and Murray 2007).

Engaging in sustainability by maintaining the same level of consumption is mainly represented by an alternative way of purchasing, which occurs through such practice as acquiring information about green offers and then proceeding to purchase them. In this way, consumers’ consideration for the environment and social welfare influences the content of their shopping trolleys (Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Seyfang 2005, 2006). Achieving sustainability through ‘greening’ consumption habits means purchasing goods whose methods of production and distribution reflect corporate sensitivity for environmental and social issues; in the case of food consumption, for example, it involves favouring organic and seasonally-grown local foods (Iyer 1999; Fucks and Lorek 2005; Selfa and Qazi 2005). Consumers’ interest in their proximity to local food chains is another manifestation of sustainable consumption (Selfa and Qazi 2005; Seyfang 2005, 2006). As contended by Seyfang (2005, p.300), consumers who source food locally, instead of relying on the mass market chains, vote to reward the local economy; they support the conservation of the local environment by favouring the maintenance of traditional local species and contribute to strengthening community bonds.

Achieving sustainability by reducing the degree of consumption encompasses consumers’ efforts to decrease the size of their ecological footprints (Shaw and Newholm 2002; Seyfang

2005; Cherrier et al. 2012). Evans (2011, p.551) clarified how many consumers moderate their use of resources by combining a reduction of the quantity of goods consumed with a consideration of the damaging environmental impacts of their consumption. They can engage in consumption-reduction at different levels, with abstention from consumption obviously representing the most drastic reaction to social and environmental concerns (Hansen and Schrader 1997). Downshifting is meant to be a voluntary, long-term change in lifestyle, which consists of scaling-down consumption and reducing working hours in order to develop personal identity through the free expression of creative potential (Hamilton 2003; Shankar et al. 2006; Cherrier and Murray 2007). Consumption-reduction has been linked to pursuing the overarching societal goal of improving life quality, rather than economic growth (Leonard-Barton 1981; Lastovicka et al. 1999; Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Todd and Lawson 2003; Seyfang 2005, 2006; Evans and Abrahamse 2009; Evans 2011). If the final goal is quality of life, then indexes, like the GDP (Gross Domestic Product), are not adequate to indicate the improvement in societal wellbeing, because they are more focused on increasing economic activity rather than improving societal welfare at large. In particular, the importance attributed to improved quality of life demands a change in the focus from individualistic economic benefits to collective wellbeing. Seyfang (2005) critically observed how ‘non-market exchange mechanisms’, like the participation in community currencies and exchanges of second-hand goods, are vehicles chosen by consumers to strengthen social community bonds. For example:

“time banks use time as a currency to build social capital and cohesion while nurturing reciprocity and mutual aid, and everyone’s time is worth the same – a key attraction for socially excluded participants.” (Seyfang 2005, p.301)

Maintained and reduced levels of consumption can occur independently of one another or alternatively a consumer may be involved in practices belonging to both categories. In either scenario, practicing a more sustainable consumption lifestyle is considered to be very complex (Shaw and Newholm 2002; Connolly and Prothero 2008; Evans and Abrahamse 2009; Evans 2011). Shaw and Newholm (2002, p.172) affirmed the complexity of ethical consumerism by highlighting how different ethical consumption practices are not necessarily “coherent” with one another and evolve as the result of the actions carried out by different stakeholders. Evans and Abrahamse (2009) emphasised how the complexity of performing sustainability derives from the constant change and evolution of adjusting everyday consumption to the dynamic interpretation and actualisation of sustainability. Sustainability is, therefore, a changeable process of adaptation involving complex practices.

Pursuing frugality (Lastovicka et al. 1999; Arnould 2003; Todd and Lawson 2003; Witkowski 2003; Pepper et al. 2009; Evans 2011) or undertaking voluntary simplicity (Leonard-Barton 1981; Etzioni 1998; Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Shaw and Newholm 2002; McDonald et al. 2006) represent two ways of engaging in a more sustainable way of living, in the form of alternative and/or reduced consumption. A range of different practices characterise the conduct of frugal and voluntary simplicity ways of living. It spans from practices directed towards the maintenance of consumption (i.e. using local shops and evaluating technological environmental solutions like purchasing low-energy light bulbs) to practices aimed at cutting down consumption levels (i.e. cutting down eating meat, not using the car, make-do-mend and the use of shared goods) (Shaw and Newholm 2002; McDonald et al. 2006).

Voluntary simplicity is defined as a voluntary choice by consumers to conduct a life where “less is more” and in order to follow this logic, people engage in practices that minimise damaging ecological effects and the production of waste (Todd and Lawson 2003; McDonald et al. 2006). Etzioni (1998) considered this to be an alternative to consumerism and identified three main groups of voluntary simplifiers on the basis of their levels of intensity in subscribing to its philosophy. Downshifter engage in “a moderate form of voluntary simplicity” (Etzioni 1998, p.622), by altering their consumption patterns rather than drastically decreasing them and favouring simpler versions of luxurious alternatives. According to Etzioni (1998), their commitment to the principles of voluntary simplicity is inconsistent as it is not necessarily applied to all purchases (reflecting the preservation of a consumption-oriented lifestyle). Strong voluntary simplifiers reduce their consumption by altering their daily existence, such as by giving up lucrative full-time jobs in exchange for more time for themselves and their families, whereas holistic simplifiers commit to a drastic reduction in consumption by embracing a life project of “simpler existence” (Etzioni 1998, p.622).

Minimisation of waste and moderation of resource use represent also the essence of a frugal lifestyle. Frugal living has its origins in the past, for example, campaigns developed by the USA government during the Second World War encouraged resource contained lifestyles through conservation, recycling and engagement in domestic production (Witkowski 2003). Whilst the frugal conduct of life was promoted in the USA to encourage patriotism and support the country during war time, nowadays, it is championed to instil the seed of sustainability so that its flourishing will occur. Evans (2011) noted how this has been promoted as a path towards the minimisation of environmental impact in a campaign called ‘War Time Spirit’, which was developed by the UK’s Energy Saving Trust (2009) in an attempt to make public audiences aware of using strategies of minimising the use of resources to respond to the problems of climate change.

Processes of alteration and/or scaling of consumption represent the main essence of sustainable consumption; voluntary simplicity and frugality have been associated with the development of a sustainable way of life as their actualisation favours minimising resource use (Leonard-Barton 1981; Shaw and Newholm 2002; Evans 2011). The following section unpacks the reasons behind consumers' willingness and engagement in sustainable living.

2.4 Consumer Motivations for Sustainable Practice

The reasons why consumers engage in a more sustainable consumption lifestyle are multiple (De Young 2000). The multiplicity of the motivations that stimulate them reflects the variety of the interpretations of the concept of sustainability, as explained in section 2.2. The majority of the publications on sustainable consumption are based upon the conviction that consumers should and are willing to make efforts to live more sustainably in view of the positive impact that their actions have on the environment and on other people. However, limiting the explanation of the motives driving sustainability to the effects that are caused outside the direct sphere of consumers is restricting (De Young 2000; Valor 2008). In effect, sustainability needs to be conceived as a source of meaning making not only regarding the contribution to the reaffirmation of a societal balance, but also for the enrichment it conveys on consumers own existence (Moisander and Pesonen 2002; Arnould 2003; Soper 2007; Soron 2010; McDonagh et al. 2012). The desire for a sense of participation and a feeling of being connected are reasons lying behind attempts to live sustainably (Meredyth 1997; McGregor 1999, 2002). In addition, consumers are motivated to perform sustainable consumption to experience an alternative form of hedonism that allows a satisfaction deriving from a stronger connection with nature and an allocation of time to be shared with loved ones (Soper 2007, 2008, 2013; Trentmann 2007). The following paragraphs are dedicated to presenting in detail the different motivations supporting sustainable consumption.

The complexity of the motivations underlying sustainable consumption practices has been largely overlooked because of the concentration on the willingness to respect natural resources and the minimisation of waste production. As highlighted by De Young (2000):

“The vast majority of attention has been given to only two motivations: providing material incentives and disincentives sufficient to make the behavior worth attending to and focusing on the altruistic reasons for engaging in the behavior. There has been relatively little exploration of other, potentially more useful alternatives.” (p.509)

Engaging in sustainable consumption has been strictly linked with an expression of consumer altruism, with education programmes and media portrayals being focused upon offering

incentives to demonstrate how the engagement in sustainability is worthwhile for its impact upon the environment and distant others (De Young 2000). The importance attributed to educating and sensitising stakeholders about sustainability underpins why the UN General Assembly referred to the period 2005-2014 as the one dedicated to education for sustainable development (Scott and Gough 2006). The major role attributed to information derives from the assumption that there is serious deficit when it comes to the effects that human action is causing environmentally, socially and economically (Burgess et al. 1998; Owens 2000; Hinton and Goodman 2009). To reduce this deficit, information has been spread through consumer education top-down activities, being seen as being a very important strategy for sensitising public audiences to matters of sustainability (Schahn and Olzer 1990).

The positive societal effects deriving from consumers' involvement in sustainable practices have been promoted by corporations, public institutions, non-profit organisations and community grass-roots initiatives (Prothero et al. 1997, 2010; McDonagh 1998; Prothero and Fitchett 2000; Hartmann and Apaolaza Ibáñez 2006; Golding 2009; Monroe et al. 2009; Moraes et al. 2012). Several public campaigns, like 'Helping the Earth begins at home', 'Going for Green' and 'Are you doing your bit?' have been developed in the UK in an attempt to increase engagement in sustainable behaviour (Burgess et al. 1998; Owens 2000; Hinton and Goodman 2009; Hargreaves 2011). Moreover, the public has been sensitised to the worsening of environmental risks also through media portrayals, such as Al Gore's documentary 'An Inconvenient Truth', depicting the damaging effects caused by Western production and consumption (Prothero et al. 2010). These actions have been aimed at heightening public awareness of sustainability and encouraging people to act responsibly by advising them on how to modify their water and energy usage as well as how to identify environmentally-friendly products and services (Hinton and Goodman 2009). Creating and distributing green commodities promotes an alternative idea of life quality with an underlying message that is no longer 'live to consume' but 'consume to live' (Prothero and Fitchett 2000; Prothero et al. 2010).

Echoing section 2.3, accomplishing voluntary simplicity and frugal lifestyles has been seen by consumers as a path to reaping societal benefits. Shaw and Newholm (2002) traced the link between ethics and voluntary simplicity by illustrating that ethical simplifiers voluntarily change and scale down their consumption levels to address ethical and social concerns in their daily lives. Frugality is a vehicle to pursue sustainable consumption, whereby the notion of austerity is translated into consumption practices that reduce environmental impact (Evans 2011). Consumers respond to the solicitations of educational campaigns by feeling motivated to express their own civic engagement by performing sustainable consumption to preserve the

environment but also to support the wellbeing of the community (Meredyth 1997; McGregor 2002). As mentioned above, the call for consumers to take part in the shift towards a more sustainable society is based upon a sense of feeling connected, of being part of a community whose boundaries are not necessarily geographically marked (Beck 2006; Seyfang 2006; Shaw 2007). Consuming sustainably is, thus, also motivated by a desire to feel part and participate in the community wellbeing, which resonates with the interpretation of the representations of consumer citizenship and voting as explained in the previous section. Moreover, consumers can be considered cosmopolitan citizens if they are active stakeholders whose actions support and are linked to the current and future directions of both their home countries and the world more generally (Beck 2006). For Meredyth (1997), the willingness to participate actively is a crucial condition for consumers to commit to the sustainability agenda and to make a difference through their actions. Similarly, McGregor (2002, p.12) identifies “participatory consumerism” as a way through which consumers take ownership and responsibility for the effects of their consumption practices, both in terms of the effects these may have on the environment and their social role in the community, where future objectives emerge from cooperation and collaboration amongst members. Participatory consumerism is achieved by active involvement in community life involving the displaying of moral and social behaviour in support of civic and political agendas (i.e. local, national, international) and groups (McGregor 1999, 2002). At the base of a sustainable lifestyle lies a sense of participation, a desire to actively be part and contribute to shape the community, as highlighted by De Young (2000):

“There is undoubtedly a prosocial inclination in people. (...) Included is an eagerness to share news, finding pleasure from working with others toward a common goal, and, given the right conditions, a willingness to expend considerable effort in developing positive relations with others and in sharing skills and knowledge.” (De Young 2000 p.520)

Feeling part of a wider community stimulates consumers to conduct sustainable practices as does their inclination to comply with the dynamics of belonging to the group. For example, in the context of consumption experiences in hotels, Goldstein et al. (2008) discovered that consumers were more inclined to adopt environmentally-friendly behaviours when subjected to normative appeals based on the notion that the behaviour in question (i.e. reusing towels) was adhered to by the majority of the guests. Moreover, consumers are motivated to pursue sustainable consumption and participate in collective initiatives to favour the obtainment of collective wellbeing by the desire to reinforce community bonds (Shaw and Newholm 2002; McDonald et al. 2006). Monroe et al. (2009) showed the potential role of community forums to be a space where citizens have the opportunity to increase their knowledge and clarify their

doubts regarding the accomplishment of sustainability. Sharing information and experience through formal exchanges, by the use of digital platforms, and/or through informal exchanges, such as dinners and workshops, facilitates the tightening of bonds between participants with the effect of strengthening a local community (Monroe et al. 2009). Members of a new consumption community and community supported agriculture experience pleasure by being part of a group whose communal activities are dedicated to sustainability (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Moraes et al. 2010, 2012). Seyfang (2005, p.300), referring to the work by Manno (2002), highlighted how “connection and bonding are central to the pursuit of sustainability because they have positive effects on personal and environmental happiness”. For example, considering local products as collectively owned possessions reinforces the links between the community members (Cova 1997) and benefits the environment because of the lower ecological footprint produced.

Practicing sustainable consumption is not only meaningful because of consumers’ desires to contribute to environmental and social balance, the need to feel connected and shape community building, but also is a source of personal contentment. Pursuing sustainability as a path to obtaining an alternative form of hedonism is a motive that is still subject to heated debate. For some, it has been perceived as a potential threat to consumers’ own happiness, being considered as an investment limiting freedom by requiring compromise on comfort. Regarding which, Connolly and Prothero (2003) found that consumers are not easily willing to compromise on their personal comfort by reducing their consumption levels, as they equate this choice with deprivation and sacrifice. The balance between private and public enjoyment and sacrifice is an important matter in terms of understanding what moves consumers to engage in practising sustainable consumption. The concepts of consumer citizenship and voting have emphasised the altruistic stance and motive behind consumer action, but such behaviours can eventually lead to feelings of restriction, whereby the common good is being pursued to the detriment of private satisfaction (Meredith 1997; McGregor 1999, 2002; Dickinson and Carsky 2005). Whilst at the same time, consumers participate in consumer citizenship and voting also to achieve ‘the good life’ (Soper 2007), as they benefit the private sphere by having a positive influence on the construction of personal identity (Soper 2007; Trentmann 2007; Autio et al. 2009; Soron 2010). This reality that some consumers are attracted to sustainability by a promise of experiencing a hedonic alternative pleasure and as a means for social acknowledgement, counteracts the argument that a sustainable lifestyle represents a source of displeasure and compromise (De Young 2000; Soper 2007, 2008, 2013; Autio et al. 2009; Miller et al. 2009; Moraes et al. 2010, 2012; McDonagh et al. 2012).

Being motivated to pursue sustainable living so as to experience an alternative state of pleasure is a motivation that contrasts with the material-focused lifestyle that underpins the dominant social paradigm. The current Western dominant social paradigm is based upon the ideology of consumption, which is considered as the way to attain high levels of happiness (Kilbourne et al. 1997, 2009; Kilbourne and Carlson 2008). The ideology of consumption instils materialistic desires in individuals, which encourages resource intense consumption practices for the sake of obtaining pleasure and satisfaction as well as acting as an identity flag to others (Kilbourne et al. 1997, 2009; Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Kilbourne and Carlson 2008). The hedonistic and sensual gratification obtained by indulging in material ownership is counterbalanced by displeasure when it comes to assessing the environmental effects of, what has been termed hyper consumption, and the loss of quality time shared among individuals (Lipovetsky 2006; Soper 2008).

Consequently, the capacity of consumption to make consumers happier has been questioned as the aphorism 'progress = choice = happiness', upon which the Fordist deal was based, is no longer accepted as the norm (Frey and Stutzer 2002; Shankar and Fitchett 2002; Abela 2006; Shankar et al. 2006; Gabriel and Lang 2008). The ideology of consumption at the heart of the dominant social paradigm has been questioned on the basis of the effects it has on personal happiness and interpersonal relationships (Belk 1984, 1985; Shankar and Fitchett 2002; Bardakci and Whitelock 2003; Abela 2006; Shankar et al. 2006). The aspiration to own more has been linked to the propensity to work longer hours and face higher degrees of stress in order to be capable of acquiring the desired product or living the dreamed service experience (Moraes et al. 2012). As a result, pursuing sustainable living has been conceived as a possible road to overcome these problems and achieve a higher quality of life (Prothero and Fitchett 2000; Hartmann and Apaolaza Ibáñez 2006; Soper 2007, 2008, 2013; Moraes et al. 2010, 2012; Prothero et al. 2010; McDonagh et al. 2012).

Changing and/or reducing consumption patterns is, thus, driven by a search for alternative satisfaction and happiness (Moisander and Pesonen 2002; Arnould 2003; Soper 2007; Soron 2010; McDonagh et al. 2012). That is, sustainability principles are pursued to satisfy self-interest, leading to a higher degree of pleasure when compared to the stressful, anxious and time-constraining nature of hyper consumption (Soper 2007; Trentmann 2007). As such, sustainable consumption is conceived as an expression of alternative hedonism enriching consumers by disconnecting them from materialist values (Soper 2007; Autio et al. 2009). Voluntary simplifiers attribute meaning to the reduction of consumption levels, wherein they feel the progressive detachment from material possessions as a way to obtain satisfaction, pleasure and personal growth (Leonard-Barton 1981; Etzioni 1998; Craig-Lees and Hill 2002;

Shaw and Newholm 2002; McDonald et al. 2006). Leading sustainable consumption practices acquires meanings for voluntary simplifiers as a philosophy of life and a sense of belonging to the 'simple-living movement'. Voluntary simplicity is meaningful as it is understood as a way to develop "personal growth, appreciate non-materialistic values and respect interdependency between human and natural resources" (Leonard-Barton 1981, p.244). It is also conceived of as a means to pursue personal and spiritual growth by dedicating more time to the development of the self, to nurturing relationships with loved ones and strengthening community bonds (Lastovicka et al. 1999; Arnould 2003; Todd and Lawson 2003; Witkowski 2003; Pepper et al. 2009; Evans 2011). Moreover, consumers who implement voluntary simplicity or a frugality lifestyle limit their purchases and concentrate on sources of life-meaning unrelated to materialistic values without having a compelling financial need to do so (Leonard-Barton 1981; Etzioni 1998; McDonald et al. 2006; Evans 2011).

These approaches differ from thrift, because consumers who engage in the latter are moved by the attempt to maximise the satisfaction of their needs by looking for the best deal, which allows them to save the highest amount of money (Arnould 2003; Evans 2011). Whilst voluntary simplicity and frugality share the same focus on consumption reduction, they differ in the fact that frugality refers to obtaining of long-term goals, whereas voluntary simplicity is conceived as an end in itself. Similarly, thrift practices can be distinguished on the basis that they involve being part of a bigger project and circumstance rather than representing the final goal itself (Arnould 2003; Todd and Lawson 2003). Holistic simplifiers, as described in section 2.3, are portrayed by Etzioni (1998) as engaged in living a 'simpler existence', i.e. one more austere than those pertaining to voluntary simplicity or frugality. This involves not only altering their consumption habits by incorporating social, environmental and economic values, but also reducing their consumption to the extent of moving to less affluent and/or less urbanized areas.

Consumers' motivation to conduct alternative ways of living as pathways facilitating satisfaction and pleasure has been also conceptualised in literature under the umbrella name of 'alternative hedonism' (Soper 2007, 2008, 2013). This is driven by a promise of self-fulfilment, in terms of alternative gratification and pleasure, and of contributing to generate communal wellbeing (Soper 2007, 2008, 2013). With this perspective, consumers look differently upon the pleasure of consuming (Soper 2008), because they reduce working hours to reacquire time to invest in activities like home reproduction (i.e. cooking from scratch rather than relying on ready-made food) (Soper 2008, 2013). Adopting higher amounts of resources such as time, to pursue a more-sustainable life, is rewarded by a deeper sense of satisfaction and communal wellbeing (Soper 2007, 2008, 2013). Soper (2007, 2008, 2013) envisioned the redistribution of prosperity amongst people as a facilitator for the spread of alternative hedonism in view of a

more equal distribution of time and money thanks to a reduction in the working week. Those who have high wages but little time and those who possess lots of time but little money could then more easily aspire to the pleasure of alternative modes of living (Soper 2007, 2008, 2013). This revision of wealth would enable the rediscovery of the pleasure obtained from engaging in more ordinary and shared activities, such as preparing and sharing a meal or taking the time to walk instead of rushing in the traffic with a car, thereby benefitting both individuals and the environment (Soper 2008).

Consumers are moved to attempt to implement sustainable consumption also by a hedonistic pleasure obtained from social acknowledgement (Hartmann and Apaolaza Ibáñez 2006; Miller et al. 2009). Displaying a positive attitude towards the sustainability agenda is perceived as a path to acquire status and demonstrating one's environmental ethos to others. The emotional benefits obtained by consumers who are interested in conducting a sustainable lifestyle are inherently connected to the acquisition of green brands and products (Hartmann and Apaolaza Ibáñez 2006). To stimulate the incorporation of sustainability principles into the conduct of daily life, Miller et al. (2009) showed the positive effects of creating initiatives aimed at raising awareness, hedonism and social acknowledgement. These authors found that the hedonistic pleasure deriving from the synergy developed in community interaction was complimentary to the status recognition obtained. Participants in these collective initiatives received a 'trophy' cockade to be hung at their entrance door as a tangible symbol of their commitment to sustainability.

The above discussion has shed light on the complex web of motivations underpinning sustainable consumption by consumers, which have transpired as being multiple and complementary. One theme that would appear to run through the reviewed literature is that of self-interest. Regarding which, De Young (2000) stated that self-interest is the real motive underlying sustainable engagement despite the different subjects that benefit from the effects of the sustainable behaviour. Consumers' willingness to perform sustainable practices depends also upon the perception of the efficacy of their actions (De Young 2000; Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Shaw and Clarke 1999; Shaw and Shiu 2003; Vermeir and Verbeke 2006; Valor 2008). As contended by Valor (2008), they are more prone to act sustainably when they believe their decision to respond to a green offer will make a difference.

Moreover, De Young (2000) highlighted how individuals are motivated to engage in sustainability by being driven by the possibility to develop capacities that will enable them to accomplish sustainable practices. However, a gap still exists in understanding the skills and expertise consumers actually perceive important and are able to demonstrate as effectively

supporting their pursuit of sustainability, when motivated to do so. The next section 2.5 is dedicated to reviewing how the process lived by consumers to perform their own interpretation of sustainability has been presented in literature.

2.5 Performing Sustainable Consumption

Beyond investigating the multiplicity of reasons contributing to support consumers to commit to the sustainability agenda, it is fundamental to understand how they materialise their motivations in practice. The majority of contributions to the literature have conceptualised sustainable consumption as information processing and rational choice by concentrating on the cognitive aspects of individual consumer behaviour. Such a decision-making approach fails to grasp the complexity of accomplishing sustainability principles, because of its focus on cognitive processes fails to understand the daily challenges lived by consumers in the real world (Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; Dolan 2002; Moisander and Pesonen 2002; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Szmigin et al. 2007b).

Moreover, the role attributed to information dissemination in the decision-making models can also be questioned because behaviours occur within routines and hence, cognitive deliberation is not always involved (Hobson 2003; Jackson 2005; Verplanken and Wood 2006; Moraes et al. 2012). In fact, the complexity of achieving sustainability principles in everyday lives is influenced by both personal and structural factors, which facilitate or restrain engagement in sustainable consumption (Tanner and Wölfig 2003; Seyfang 2005; Press and Arnould 2009b; Prothero et al. 2011; Moraes et al. 2012).

For the majority of consumers who adapt their daily routines to the principles of sustainability, performing sustainable consumption is a path characterised by conflicts and challenges, whereby:

“rationales for purchasing may be in transition or flux; underlying tensions and competing values may not always be resolved consistently; the consumption behaviour can be unpredictable and heavily context dependent.” (Szmigin et al. 2007b, p.225)

Consumers, furthermore, may be overwhelmed by the amount of information available and may become suspicious of the sustainable credentials of what is on offer (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Moisander 2007; Bamossy and Englis 2009; French 2009; Eckhardt et al. 2010).

2.5.1 Rational Decision-making Perspective: Characteristics and Limitations

Sustainable consumption has usually been analysed from a decision-making perspective, which involves examining the cognitive processes of consumers who embrace the sustainability agenda. Under this lens, performing sustainability in consumers' everyday lives has been conceived as an information processing exercise composed of linear phases and their interconnections (Carrington et al. 2010). The assumption is that consumers are rational utility-maximising decision makers who, moved by altruism, adopt logic to search for information to take effective environmentally friendly decisions. Schaefer and Crane (2005) have described environmentally conscious consumers as:

“motivated by strong environmental values and attitudes, therefore seeking environmental product information, rationally weighing the utility provided by a particular product against the environmental cost attached and making a purchasing decision based on these environmental criteria in conjunction with more conventional considerations of price, quality, and convenience.” (p.79)

Consumers as rational decision makers are supposed to process and apply the available information when performing their behaviour, which is attributed a major role in changing this behaviour by influencing and modifying their beliefs and, consequently, their attitudes and intentions (Thøgersen 1994; Olander and Thøgersen 1995). Particular attention has been paid to the role played by consumer knowledge as a predictor of behaviour.

The Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein 1980) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1991) are the theoretical frameworks that have been applied most to investigate the dynamics underlying sustainable consumption in terms of decision-making processes (Kilbourne and Beckmann 1998). The Fishbein - Ajzen model, at the base of the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein 1980), identifies how beliefs about and evaluations of outcomes determine the attitudes demonstrated towards a particular behaviour, thereby influencing the intention to act, with this being considered as the key determinant of the behaviour (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein 1980; Jackson 2005). The interconnections between the different factors comprising the structure of this model are conceived as being in the context of volitional control exerted by the individuals (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein 1980; Jackson 2005). The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen and Madden 1986; Ajzen 1988, 1991) has been developed as an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action to facilitate the study of situations occurring without the exertion of complete and overall volitional control. With this in mind, the model has been adjusted with the introduction of the indicator of perceived behavioural control (PBC),

whereby people's belief in having the capacity to perform a behaviour (Ajzen 1991) impacts on their intentions as well as indirectly on their behaviour. PBC, hence, represents people's faith in their ability to accomplish the behaviour in question (Ajzen and Madden 1986). It has been defined as the result of two concepts, which are conceived as distinctive but correlated: controllability, the belief that performance is up to the actor, and self-efficacy, the confidence that an actor has in his/her ability to perform a task according to his/her judgment regarding the ease or difficulty of performing it (Ajzen 2002). The perception of consumers' own degree of behavioural control is, then, conceived to influence their motivation to engage or not in a given behaviour because of their stronger or weaker belief that they are capable of performing it.

Differences and similarities between perceived and actual capacity to turn environmental concerns into behaviours is at the base of the debated comparison between perceived behavioural control (PBC) and actual behavioural control (ABC), where the latter is defined as the actual level of control exercised by an individual in a particular situation (Ajzen and Maden 1986; Ajzen 1991, 2002; Carrington et al. 2010). Considering the relation between PBC and ABC, Ajzen (2002) commented:

“To the extent that people are realistic in their judgments of a behaviour's difficulty, a measure of perceived behavioural control can serve as a proxy for actual control and contribute to the prediction of the behaviour in question.” (p.666)

Jackson (2005) pointed out that many of the studies have been concentrated upon investigating the relationships between different factors, such as attitudes, intentions and PBC, but have failed to measure the actual behaviour. The claim that PBC is an indicator of ABC has been highly contested in that the former has been criticised because it represents a subjective perception of the capacity to act and one that may differ from any reality (Jackson 2005; Carrington et al. 2010).

The Motivation-Opportunity-Ability (MOA) is another model applied to map out the processes cognitively followed by consumers to realise environmentally and socially friendly behaviours (Ölander and Thøgersen 1995). Opportunity is conceived as a pre-condition to act, which is defined as the contextual situation in which the behaviour should take place and represents the overall conditions allowing the performance of the behaviour. This factor has similarities with PBC, because of consumers' subjective perception of what situations represent and hence, how they can become opportunities (Jackson 2005). Ability is conceived as a necessary condition for the implementation of motivation in performance, which was devised by Pieters (1991) and developed in the context of consumers' participation in waste separation programmes. The

combined influence of ability, conceived as the degree to which a behaviour is under a person's volitional control, and motivational factors, such as intention, were found to influence the correct performance of the task. Ability was conceived as being the result of task knowledge and habit (Pieters 1991; Thøgersen 1994; Olander and Thøgersen 1995), with knowledge exerting a double role in motivating and enabling consumers to take part in the waste separation programmes. It emerged that information was evaluated effectively when it was received by consumers both before performing the task, in the form of education, and after the performance, in the form of feedback on their conduct (Pieters 1991). However, despite their knowing, these researchers discovered that ingrained patterns and routines might interfere with accomplishing new tasks and undermine people's ability to perform recycling practices (Pieters 1991; Thøgersen 1994). Nevertheless, although time and effort are required to participate in recycling practices, the more consumers engage in them, the more they become embedded in their daily routines and the less they experience difficulty in undertaking them.

Moisander (2007) expanded the definition of consumer ability beyond Pieters' (1991) combination of task knowledge and habit to include Thøgersen's (1994) and Olander and Thøgersen's (1995) opportunity factor by defining it as:

“Ability is assumed to be a function of the personal resources (within the consumer) that are needed to perform the behaviour, as well as on (sic) the opportunity to perform the behaviour, which is determined by aspects of the immediate environment. Opportunity generally refers to various external factors that impede or facilitate behaviour.” (Moisander 2007, p.405)

Moisander's (2007) consideration of ability as a function of consumers' resources and of the influence played by contextual factors partly effectively responds to the criticisms addressed towards decision-making perspectives that mainly concentrate upon the understanding of cognitive processes and overlook the role played by the surrounding environment. In general, several objections have, in fact, been raised in relation to the adoption of the decision-making approach: concentration on singular cognitive processes rather than the more complex interaction consumers have with their environment (i.e. Davies et al. 2002; Dolan 2002), the excessive role attributed to the capacity of intentions and attitudes to predict behaviour (i.e. Davies et al. 2002; Jackson 2005; Carrington et al. 2010) and the central role allocated to information-spreading in the drive towards sustainability (i.e. Bartiaux 2008).

As mentioned above, the adoption of a rational decision-making perspective presents difficulties in understanding the problems faced by consumers when pursuing a sustainable

consumption lifestyle, because of its focus on cognitive processes (which come at the expense of considering contextual influences) (Dolan 2002; Spaargaren 2003; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Echardt et al. 2010; Soron 2010). The impact of involvement and perceived availability of sustainable offers (Vermeir and Verbeke 2006), as well as consumer perceived confidence and personal values (Vermeir and Verbeke 2008), are all factors that have been included in proposals for more comprehensive decision-making models in studies of sustainable consumption. The majority of these factors focus on individuals, rather than the interaction between consumers and the environment and the inconsistencies experienced in day-to-day life. Behaviours occur within a context and so to analyse them in isolation from this context clearly creates limitations (Davies et al. 2002; Dolan 2002; Carrington et al. 2010). The concept of ‘opportunity’ has been introduced in an attempt to take into account contextual influences within the theorisation of intention-attitude-behaviour gap models (Thøgersen 1994; Olander and Thøgersen 1995; Moisander 2007; Carrington et al. 2010). Structural frameworks, experiences, cultural interpretations and social negotiations, within which decisions are made, all exert a strong influence upon the development of sustainable actions and ignoring them hinders the capturing of the full complexity of trying to live sustainably (Burgess et al. 1998; Halkier 1999; Owens 2000; Dolan 2002; Hobson 2003; Bartiaux 2008; Hinton and Goodman 2009). As pointed out above, in the sustainability context, decision-making models have been usually applied to the study of waste separation practices (Pieters 1991; Thøgersen 1994; Olander and Thøgersen 1995). It could be argued that this specific context is more suited to using such an approach, because of the highly regulated nature of recycling practices resulting from norms and information provided by local councils.

The application of a decision-making perspective to study the cognitive processes followed by consumers to implement their sustainable beliefs has attributed great importance to intentions as predictors of behaviours (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Auger and Devinney 2007; Carrington et al. 2010). Regarding which, the “core cognitive progression - beliefs determine attitudes; attitudes lead to intentions and intentions inform behaviour” (Carrington et al. 2010, p.142) has been specifically questioned, for intentions are not reliable by themselves as predictors of behaviours (Davies et al. 2002; Carrington et al. 2010). Davies et al. (2002, p.32-34) criticised the importance attributed to intentions in the application of the Theory of Reasoned Action, claiming that it may only be applied to predict the occurrence of behaviours when there is a high correlation between intentions and behaviours. In fact, Davies et al. (2002) contended that a strong association between intentions and behaviours is obtainable only when three specific circumstances coincide. The first precondition is a necessary fit between attitudes, norms and intentions regarding the particular behaviour in terms of specificity. Secondly, the role played by the interval of time between the declaration of the intention and observation of the behaviour

is crucial, whereby the more time passes, the more likely it is that other factors will exert influence on the possibility for the behaviour to take place. Thirdly, intentions are considered to be good predictors of behaviours when consumers are capable of exerting the required control over the performance (Davies et al. 2002, p.32-33). Consequently, these prerequisites limit the validity of the application of the model of the Theory of Reasoned Action as the concurrence of all three conditions is rare. The predictability of the model of Theory of Planned Behaviour, as in the case of the Theory of Reasoned Action, is based on the same necessity of correspondence in time and space between intentions and behaviours (Davies et al. 2002). Furthermore, the central role attributed to intentions may lead to biased predictions because of the adoption of self-reported survey approaches (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Auger and Devinney 2007). That is, consumers' statements of their intentions to engage in environmentally-friendly and ethical behaviours reflect their wish to be perceived as 'good people', more than representing the actual behaviours in which they engage.

Spreading a sustainable lifestyle has been largely supported by the diffusion of information to promote its benefits. The essential role attributed to information in encouraging consumers to act represents the third main critique of a decision-making perspective (Carrington et al. 2010). Conceiving consumers as rational agents, who act mainly on the information available to them, does not consider the nuanced and emotional paths experienced to live the functional and hedonic nature of sustainability (Dolan 2002; Schaefer and Crane 2005). The paradigm of consumers' rationality has been questioned, because the focus on explicit consciousness overlooks the tacit knowledge underlying the intricate nexus of sustainable daily practices lived by consumers (Hobson 2003; Shove 2003). The top-down approach of creating and distributing information has, in fact, been criticised because of its focus on the cognitive nature of knowledge, thereby neglecting the practical consciousness ingrained in everyday practices (Hobson 2003). Shove (2003), for example, studied the process experienced by consumers in transforming the novelty of environmental conventions into normality. She investigated tacit knowledge related to 'taken-for-granted' household practices and came to the conclusion that this is one of the biggest influences on the success of the introduction of sustainable environmental practices. Therefore, despite the importance of information to perform sustainable consumption, this cannot be the only focus because:

“when the goal is to change consumer behaviour the management of the physical conditions is as important as the management of information.” (Thøgersen 1994, p.159)

Moreover, promoting behavioural change through information campaigns does not necessarily lead to a higher spread of sustainability, because of consumers' difficulty in understanding the

educational message. That is, it is likely that they will forget significant pieces of information and/or simply act irrationally, not taking into account what it conveys (Thøgersen 1994; Shaw and Black 2009). The relevance attributed to increased education and information-spreading is, moreover, counteracted by the results of extensive market research studies, which although portraying Western consumers as highly aware and concerned about the environment, points to their having difficulty in translating these concerns into actions (Hartmann and Apaolaza Ibáñez 2006; Bamossy and Englis 2009; French 2009; Peattie and Collins 2009). Socially-conscious customers wish to make a contribution towards safeguarding the environment (Webster 1975); nonetheless, these feelings have been described as remaining more at the level of attitude and intention, rather than materialising in terms of behaviour. The misalignment between positive beliefs in sustainability principles and actions has been called the ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Auger and Devinney 2007; Bamossy and Englis 2009; French 2009; Peattie and Collins 2009; Press and Arnould 2009b; Carrington et al. 2010; Prothero et al. 2011) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour fails to account for the existence of this (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Vermeir and Verbeke 2006; Auger and Devinney 2007; Chatzidakis et al. 2007). Inconsistencies between attitudes and behaviours have also been registered in the conduct of sustainable consumption practices by consumers who fully believe and work hard to align their lifestyles with their sustainability credo (Shaw and Newholm 2002; Connolly and Prothero 2008; Moraes et al. 2012).

Decision-making models are problematic when it comes to explaining the gaps occurring between what consumers believe and intend to do and what they actually do (Moraes et al. 2012). Approaching sustainability as a problem-solving exercise, hence, presents difficulties in unlocking the emotional and cultural complexity of sustainable consumption (Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; Dolan 2002; Moisander and Pesonen 2002; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Peattie and Peattie 2009; Eckhardt et al. 2010).

2.5.2 Complexity of Living Sustainably: Challenges and Doubts

Sustainable consumption is a nonlinear process lived by consumers who compromise and encounter obstacles to materialise their own expression of sustainability (Iyer 1999; Moisander and Pesonen 2002; Connolly and Prothero 2008). They are wary of the truthfulness and validity of sustainable claims and offers (Autio et al. 2009; Evans and Abrahamse 2009). Consequently, individuals mistrust public/private organisations and scientific experts, because they are sceptical of the conduct of science, politics and business in managing the risks afflicting society (Beck 2006). Moreover, consumers have difficulties in conducting a sustainable way of life, because they feel overwhelmed and confused by the amount of information available on the

environmental impact of products and services (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Moisander 2007; Horiuchi et al. 2009; Jahdi and Acikdilli 2009).

More information does not necessarily translate into more sustainable practices, because the exposure to an overload of green information and the fear of green-washing strategies results in increased consumer scepticism regarding the credibility of the eco-friendliness of goods (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Prothero et al. 1997; Burgess et al. 1998; Owens 2000; Moisander 2007; Connolly and Prothero 2008; Bamossy and Englis 2009; French 2009; Horiuchi et al. 2009; Jahdi and Acikdilli 2009). In particular, consumers question the truthfulness of promotional sustainability claims, because they think that the engagement in the sustainability cause has been pursued by some firms merely as a means to boost their sales (Peattie and Crane 2005; Horiuchi et al. 2009; Jahdi and Acikdilli 2009; Zaman et al. 2010). Green-wash is defined as “disinformation disseminated by an organization, etc., so as to present an environmentally responsible public image; a public image of environmental responsibility promulgated by or for an organization, etc., but perceived as being unfounded or intentionally misleading” (Oxford English Dictionary). The results of the Havas Media survey (2009) revealed that 64 per cent of 20,000 consumers interviewed worldwide considered sustainability to be a marketing tool and hence, often did not trust green brands’ claims (Horiuchi et al. 2009).

The quantity of logos certifying various environmental benefits has also resulted in an increase in consumer scepticism (Peattie and Crane 2005). Regarding which, on-pack communication is a major way through which consumers learn about the materials that a product is made from and the environmentally-friendly manner in which a product should be disposed (Pieters 1991). Moreover, consumers use labels to ascertain value-based characteristics, such as the social, environmental and/or animal welfare benefits offered by products (McEachern and Warnaby 2008b, p.414). However, the variety of eco-labels and of on-pack communication has provoked a counter-effect of increasing consumer confusion (Prothero et al. 1997; Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Peattie and Crane 2005; Connolly and Prothero 2008; McEachern and Warnaby 2008b). Consequently, the effectiveness of these labels varies, depending on the degree of consumer awareness of their existence and on the degree of interest that they engender (McEachern and Warnaby 2008a). The credibility of corporate information has been questioned also in terms of the adherence to certification programmes (i.e. Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance). For instance, many consumers have questioned the actual educational and health outcomes of farmers’ participation in Fair Trade schemes in developing countries (Arnould et al. 2009; Griffiths 2012). According to Griffiths (2012), the premium prices supported by Western consumers to buy a Fair Trade product do not necessarily translate into benefits for the farmers; the money

mainly supports the costs of Fair Trade conformity certification and/or social projects and there is no clear evidence of the maintenance of a fair and stable price for farmers.

Due to the overload and conflicting information to which consumers are exposed, they feel that they are required to consider the implications of their consumption choices, yet experience difficulties in making the 'right decision' (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Bamossy and Englis 2009; French 2009; Eckhardt et al. 2010). Conducting a more sustainable lifestyle is, therefore, not straightforward, because of the incoherencies and compromises encountered by people when interpreting sustainability in their daily lives (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Newholm 2005; Szmigin et al. 2007b; Connolly and Prothero 2008; Moraes et al. 2012). They experience contradictions between their lived practices and their ethical beliefs, because of the unpredictability of contextual circumstances and challenges, like lack of time, budget restraints and accommodating family tastes (Szmigin et al. 2007b; McEachern et al. 2010). Consequently, unavoidable "duty conflicts" (Prothero et al. 2011, p.34) occur whilst they attempt to cope with the contrasting goals of the many roles that they play in their daily lives. For example, driving children to after-school sports classes is in line with the sense of being a good parent and supporting children's desires, but it also contrasts with living a more sustainable life by maintaining a low carbon footprint.

Connolly and Prothero (2008) further extended the discussion of incoherencies encountered when actualising sustainability by highlighting a dichotomous condition in consumer engagement in green consumption practices: consumers feel able to face environmental and social challenges, but simultaneously they are insecure about the integrity of their practices. These authors analysed the ways in which consumers engage in green consumption on a daily basis by taking into account the effect of the external social relations on identity and how personal decisions affect global considerations. On the one hand, maintaining social relations may entail the necessity for them to compromise and negotiate their green beliefs, whilst on the other hand, the same principles and beliefs may shape their consumer practices and relations in an unexpected way.

Specific contrasts have been noted in circumstances where consumers consider the consumption of certain goods as negative, but the same products are crucial for social relations to take place. In his study of the complexity faced by ethical consumers in their search for integrity, Newholm (2005) explained how his informants confessed to breaks in their coherent integrity when performing more-sustainable practices: they balance their commitments, are influenced by social necessities and have other passions which clash with their ethical beliefs. The author underlined how some of his informants lived with guilt about such inconsistencies, whilst

others openly embraced them as enriching their life paths. In the process of analysing how ethical consumers live incoherencies in the accomplishment of their life projects, Newholm (2005) identified three strategies enacted by them: distancing, integrating and rationalising. Distancing is a strategy entailing consumers' rejection of the use of a product or service, like a car, preferring to substitute it with more-environmentally friendly options, like cycling or using public transport. By integrating, consumers blur their ethical beliefs with work, consumption and social activities all in the name of sustainability within the conduct of a practice. For Newholm (2005), consumers rationalise when they engage in materialist consumption practices, but conduct ethical ones when they feel overwhelmed by the negative environmental and social effects otherwise provoked by a particular practice. This scholar concluded that providing information does not necessarily lead to the spread of more ethical and sustainable practices, due to unpredictability in the search for integrity in the practices that consumers pursue (ibid).

The existence of difficulties in leading a sustainable lifestyle has been theoretically defined by Moraes et al. (2012) as coherent inconsistencies rather than gaps. The authors investigated the complexity of performing production-engaged practices in the context of new consumption communities and contended that discrepancies in the conduct of sustainable practices were coherent within the overall project of these communities' initiatives. The incoherencies, challenges and compromises experienced by consumers in merging their ethical and green concerns in the conduct of their daily routines reflects "how it is hard work to be green and being socially aware" (Young et al. 2010, p.26). The "motivational and practical complexity of green consumption" (Moisander 2007, p.404) do not only depend upon perplexing and abundant information, or the personal challenges experienced by consumers, but also on the influence of contextual barriers (Sanne 2002; Tanner and Wölfig 2003; Carrington et al. 2010; McEachern et al. 2010; Young et al. 2010; Hargreaves 2011).

Consumers can be 'locked-in' to particular unsustainable consumption patterns, because of marketplace social structures, urban development, living conditions, business and working patterns, time pressure, store characteristics, availability of sustainable offers and/or premium prices (Sanne 2002; Tanner and Wölfig 2003; Defra Report 2008; Press and Arnould, 2009b; Carrington et al. 2010; McEachern et al. 2010; Hargreaves 2011). Barriers influencing their purchases of green food have been categorised by Tanner and Wölfig (2003) as: personal factors (such as attitudes, personal norms, perceived behaviour barriers and knowledge) and contextual factors (such as socioeconomic characteristics, living conditions and store characteristics). Moreover, sustainable energy consumption has been analysed as being constrained by policies and regulation, product accessibility and availability, pricing and customer knowledge (Press and Arnould 2009b). Lack of time and space in consumers' lives

has also been identified as constraining the performance of sustainability in that what is required to research sustainability offers so as to acquire the necessary information for evaluating the environmental nature of goods is hard to come by (Young et al. 2010).

2.6 Consumer Competence: The Lens to Study Sustainable Consumption

As discussed in the previous section, studies on sustainable consumption have adopted different approaches when examining the incoherencies between intentions-attitudes-behaviours (Thøgersen 1994; Olander and Thøgersen 1995; Bamossy and Englis 2009; Carrington et al. 2010). Some contributions have attributed a central role to the dissemination of knowledge as the solution to satisfy a deficit of information about sustainability (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Evans and Jackson 2008). Providing more information, however, has been questioned as a means to achieve sustainability, as considered in subsection 2.5.1. Moreover, performing a more sustainable way of life is complicated by increased consumer scepticism, the sense of confusion resulting from information overload and the influence of daily routines (Burgess et al. 1998; Owens 2000; Dolan 2002; Hobson 2003; Tanner and Wölfling 2003; Moisander 2007; Bartiaux 2008; Hinton and Goodman 2009; Press and Arnould 2009b). Understanding how consumers materialise sustainable consumption within the complexity of their everyday life is, hence, complicated.

The question that emerges is whether consumers possess the skills and ability required to perform practices in line with their ascribed responsibility to contribute to shape and condition the evolution of the development of sustainability (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Pavlova 2005; Jaffe and Gertler 2006). This thesis focuses upon competence as the lens through which to study the ways consumers carry out sustainable consumption practices. Understanding the skills adopted and deemed relevant by them to conduct a sustainable lifestyle will serve to explain the ways consumers cope with the relative challenges, compromises and difficulties that confront them. Conceptually, Stanfield and Stanfield (1980) were the first to reflect on consumer capacity to manage consumption in a way that favours sustainability. The authors portrayed Western consumers as devoid of craft knowledge (the ability to differentiate between different materials and production processes) and hence, having difficulty in correctly judging the quality and the environmental friendliness of goods. They pointed out the contrast between the development of an art of living, necessary for the establishment of a more sustainable society, and current patterns of consumption which encourage the accumulation of possessions regardless of the environmental and social effects provoked. Consequently, a range of effective skills that can bring about less consumption and more citizenship-consumption behaviours has been called for (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Leonard-Barton 1981; Meredyth 1997; McGregor

2002; Pavlova 2005; Stibbe 2009), which requires in-depth analysis of consumer competence in sustainability terms so as to identify what these entail and this is the goal of this thesis.

The choice to adopt consumer competence as the perspective to investigate the performance of sustainable consumption is also theoretically justified by the call by Carrington et al. (2010) to comprehend the actual behavioural control exerted by consumers when attempting to carry out sustainable practices. A gap may, then, occur between the perceived control that a consumer thinks she/he has over an environmentally friendly behaviour and the actual control exerted in the real situation. However, Carrington et al. (2010) criticised the existence of a gap in the study of actual behavioural control as its theorisation is still highly conceptual and abstract:

“To date, this concept has yet to be further developed or refined. In addition, the transition between PBC and ABC (i.e. when and how one’s PBC is transformed into one’s ABC in a given situation) is not currently understood. Therefore, we see the infancy of ABC within the literature as a limitation of the conceptual model, and encourage further conceptual research regarding this construct.” (Carrington et al. 2010, p.155)

The gap identified by Carrington et al. (2010) runs parallel with the current research interest regarding the competence adopted by consumers to cope with the difficulties of everyday life whilst trying to achieve their sustainability goals. Previous conceptualisations have identified how the perception of being able to conduct a task represents an influential motive to engage in trying to perform it, as presented in section 2.4 and subsection 2.5.1. As contended by De Young (2000):

“we make the error of assuming that once people know what they should do and why they should do it, they will automatically know how to proceed. The issue here is an essential, underlying, and yet sometimes overlooked aspect of behavior change: the need people have for, and the satisfaction people derive from, a sense of competence.” (p.523)

This study focuses on understanding how consumers actually conceive and display competence to act sustainably.

2.7 Conclusion

Consumers who engage in a more sustainable lifestyle and make sustainable consumption choices have been usually portrayed as rational decision makers, who apply the information

acquired to realise sustainable lifestyles. They, however, face ambiguities and difficulties in their attempts to live sustainably. In brief, they experience paradoxical outcomes, competing priorities, dilemmas and compromises regarding the move to a conscious consumption lifestyle (Szmigin et al. 2007b; Connolly and Prothero 2008; McEachern et al. 2010). They continuously have to manage such inconsistencies and the problems emerging from their attempt to balance budget limits, the performance of their multiple selves and their sustainability credo (Connolly and Prothero 2008; McEachern et al. 2010). Therefore, an exclusively rational approach fails to grasp the emotional, symbolic, and cultural meanings of sustainable consumption (Belk 1988; Peattie and Peattie 2009; Eckhardt et al. 2010); it underestimates the impact of the search for a balance between subjective desires and values and the social identification with subculture meanings (Black and Cherrier 2010; Jackson 2005; Soron 2010).

In view of this ambiguous and complex background, for this thesis a framework that has at its centre the concept of consumer competence is adopted to understand how sustainability is lived by consumers in their daily lives, thereby overcoming the limitations of the decision-making processes and the concentration on knowledge acquisition. Exploring and interpreting the competence supporting sustainable consumption responds to Sennett's call (2008, p.12) to reflect upon the skills required to make and inhabit sustainable spaces for people to become "good craftsmen of the environment".

Chapter 3 presents the theoretical foundations of the concept of competence by drawing upon different disciplines, including psychology (White 1959, 1971; Bandura 1977), education (Dolz and Ollagnier 2002) and human resources management (Le Boterf 1994, 2008b, 2011).

3 UNPACKING THE CONCEPT OF CONSUMER COMPETENCE

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the current conceptualisations of consumer competence. The extant literature is analysed to identify the different aspects characterising this concept in terms of its constituting elements and the variety of the terminologies adopted. An overview of the foundations of this concept reveals its complex nature, for it can be found in the literature of psychology (White 1959, 1971; Bandura 1977), strategy (Penrose 1959; Wernerfelt 1984; Grant 1995), human resources (HR) management (Le Boterf 1994, 2011) and education (Dolz and Ollagnier 2002), amongst others. Competence is always treated in this literature with respect to the obtainment of a specific goal and, hence, contextualised (Le Boterf 1994, 2008b, 2011). At a wider level, the thirst for obtaining competence and feeling capable of conducting a specific desired and/or required behaviour is ingrained in human nature (White 1959, 1971; Deci and Ryan 2008; Ryan et al. 2008). Moreover, section 3.2 considers the theorisation of competence in terms of its connection with the concept of resource. The distinction between resource and competence, as proposed in the strategy literature (Penrose 1959; Wernerfelt 1984; Grant 1995) and that of HR management (Le Boterf 1994, 2008a, 2011), differs from consumer research conceptualisations that tend to adopt the term of resource as being synonymous with competence, as in the case of the resource-based theory of the customer (Arnould et al. 2006a; Arnould 2007).

After consideration of the main features of competence in section 3.2, the next section 3.3 discusses issues regarding this concept that are subject to ongoing debate. More specifically, it is focused upon the difficulties in judging competence. Regarding which, in the field of HR evaluating the degree of competence of an employee is facilitated by the use of reference documents, wherein the skills necessary to conduct a task and the expected outcomes have been previously mapped (Le Boterf 2008b, 2011). However, judging consumer competence in the marketplace is more problematic, because no one officially fulfils the role of evaluating that displayed in the interactions among different stakeholders. Moreover, consumers as judges of their own competence can misevaluate their own degree of expertise by imprecisely calibrating their knowledge (Alba and Hutchinson 2000) and in addition to this, they can misinterpret the degree of reliability of the sources, which they depend upon to take their consumption decisions (Price and Feick 1984; Bertrandias and Vernet 2012).

Subsequently, the focus shifts to reviewing the actual conceptualisations of consumer competence in depth. Consumer research has mainly equated the notion with knowledge, which enables consumers to be efficient purchasers, as shown in section 3.4 (Alba and Hutchinson

1987; Berg 2007; Berg and Teigen 2009). The emphasis is, then, directed towards the development and constant update of a solid knowledge background on the product and/or service to be bought. Consumers' decision-making processes are also supported by their ability to maximise the use of technology and their literacy regarding the functioning of the markets and advertising mechanisms (Sproles et al. 1978; Berg 2007; Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Nancarrow et al. 2011). In general, conceptualising consumer competence in terms of knowledge primarily revolves around its antecedents and the process of purchasing.

Consumers also use competence to become prosumers, as presented in section 3.5, which refers to individuals simultaneously taking on the roles of producer and consumer (Toffler 1980; Kotler 1986). That is, consumers are prosumers when they display craftsmanship to be the producers of their own consumption experiences (Campbell 2005; Sennett 2008; Cova and Cova 2012). Consumer competence has a positive effect on production in that it benefits the development and improvement of products and services (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000, 2004). More specifically, a collaborative relationship with a corporate counterpart is supported by consumer competence in the form of a mentality of collaboration, a capacity to dialogue, a disposition to interact and creativity (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Beckett and Nayak 2008; Cova and Cova 2012). Consequently, the collaboration between consumers and producers entails the use by marketers of consumer competence as an asset to ameliorate their offer and, hence, gain competitive advantage. The above has demonstrated that competence is a complex concept (Le Boterf 2008a), which perhaps explains why its application in the consumption domain is still under theorised (Cova et al. 2006; Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Carù and Cova 2011). This thesis is aimed at extending understanding of consumer competence in terms of its multifaceted nature and its role in helping consumers to accomplish their daily life projects and goals.

3.2 Conceptual Basis of Competence

Competence is a term highly debated in different disciplines. This section is dedicated to the identification of the common traits characterising this concept found in contributions provided by the psychology, HR management, education and strategy literature.

Competence was originally conceptualised in the domain of psychology, being conceived as an individual's belief in her/his capacity to complete a certain task, mainly in connection with her/his motivation to act (White 1959, 1971; Bandura 1977; Deci and Ryan 2008; Ryan et al. 2008; Harré and Bullen 2010). The motivational aspect of competence is due to the human necessity to feel effective in the activities a person is engaged in (White 1959, 1971). White (1959, 1971) debated that humans are driven by an urge towards competence as the need and

desire to possess this represent a primary source of motivation. He highlighted how competence is self-initiating, as follows:

“To be competent means to be sufficient or adequate to meet the demands of a situation or task. Animals and children do not take things passively; they have an urge to improve their competence in dealing with the environment by exploring, testing and trying out their own powers to make things happen.” (White 1971, p.273)

Humans are, then, continuously striving for improving their degree of competence for the sake and pleasure derived from feeling competent and thus being able to pursue their plans and goals. Furthermore, competence is self-rewarding because individuals derive confidence and self-esteem by accomplishing a desired outcome and, consequently, by being recognised as competent by others (White 1971). For these reasons, White (1959) conceived competence as a motivational concept and coined the term effectance motivation, which indicates a tendency to explore and influence one’s own environment to gain a feeling of efficacy that is relevant and motivated in its own right, whereby:

“effectance motivation may lead to continuing exploratory interests or active adventures when in fact there is no longer any gain in actual competence or any need for it in terms of survival. In both cases the motive is capable of yielding surplus satisfaction well beyond what is necessary to get the biological work done.” (White 1959, p.323)

Harter (1978) extended White’s conceptualisation of effectance motivation by focusing on its developmental implications. That is, an individual’s sense of competence varies according to the effects of successes or failures experienced, thus mirroring the effects exerted by performance accomplishments on the formation of self-efficacy, as identified by Bandura (1977). Self-efficacy is another key construct of competence, coined by Bandura in 1977, whereby its expectation is represented by the belief that a person can successfully implement the behaviour necessary to produce the desired outcome. Moreover, the author contended that expectations of personal efficacy influence the efforts that an individual is going to invest in an experience and the time spent trying to perform, despite potential adversities. Expectations of personal efficacy depend upon four sources of information: performance accomplishments (past masteries or failures appear to be proof of the capacities to cope and succeed in life); vicarious experience (understanding the difficulty of a task is facilitated by observing and rating the performance of others when carrying out that activity); verbal persuasion (the formation of self-efficacy is influenced by suggestions); and physiological states (emotions can reveal a person’s

awareness of the level of their personal competency) (ibid). Self-efficacy and effectance motivation are both based upon an individual's perceived judgement of his/her ability to master a task and to achieve the desired outcome. Self-efficacy has represented the basis for the development of 'perceived behavioural control', developed in the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen 1991) as well as competence, as defined under the self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2008; Ryan et al. 2008; Harré and Bullen 2010). Perceived behavioural control has previously been discussed in subsection 2.5.1 in relation to its widespread application under the theory of planned behaviour for studying sustainability.

As with all other theories, under self-determination theory competence is viewed as a core motivator of human action (Deci and Ryan 2000). Proponents of this theory contend that human activity is guided by three needs: relatedness, integrity/autonomy and competence (Deci and Ryan 2000, 2008; Ryan et al. 2008; Harré and Bullen 2010). Relatedness is the need to belong, be valued and cared about by others. Integrity/autonomy refers to the desire to exert volitional control and to experience a sense of choice in the regulation, whilst competence represents the necessity to feel confident and effective in one's actions. All three are needs essential for an individual's psychological equilibrium and, if satisfied, they increase the commitment to persevere with an activity (Deci and Ryan 2000, 2008; Ryan et al. 2008; Harré and Bullen 2010). The realisation of all three needs leads to the achievement of psychological wellbeing, regardless of the individuals' cultural backgrounds (Deci and Ryan 2008). Moreover, competence can be taken as a strong proxy for commitment, especially in the case of an activity aimed at consolidating one's individual goals, like achieving good results in education projects (Harré and Bullen 2010). The satisfaction of these psychological needs concurs with the establishment of eudemonic living, a state in which people's most fundamental psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness are satisfied (Ryan et al. 2008).

Psychological contributions have, hence, demonstrated the motivational nature of competence by showing how the urge to engage in a practice depends upon the individual's perceived capacity for successfully undertaking that in question (Bandura 1977; Deci and Ryan 2008; Ryan et al. 2008; Harré and Bullen 2010). Consequently, competence has been conceived in terms of the cognitive processes experienced by individuals as a variable that influences the decisions on which behaviours to engage in and also influences the expected performance of these behaviours.

The cognitive processes underlying the development of competence have been studied also in the context of HR management to unpack the nature of employee and organisational competences.

According to Le Boterf (1994), competence results from:

“a cognitive process by which the author has tried to isolate the different steps and necessary conditions at the individual level. It could be considered as the individual’s capacity to select his/her resources effectively so as to be able to face a situation and provide a relevant answer (contextualised and finalised) to the problem at hand.” (Le Boterf 1994, p.56)

The HR management tradition has specifically highlighted that competence is ends driven. That is, competence is conceived of in terms of the achievement of a specific goal and within a specific context. Despite considering the existence of an overarching structural meaning, therefore, under this lens consumer competence is essentially an etic term. However, it needs to be translated into an emic context as it is dynamic and situated (Allal 2002).

Taking into account the ends driven nature of competence reveals how it has an individual manifestation of a cultural origin, resulting from interaction with the environment as well as the processes of formation and acquisition of information (Le Boterf 1994; Durand 2006). The contextualisation of competence has been defined in human resources terms as resulting from the interaction between the subject, the professional context and the process of formation. It is the interplay between defined skills, contextual influence, individual interpretation and achievement of the task that lies behind the complex nature of competence (Le Boterf 2008a). Its true nature lies in a flexible, dynamic, mix-and-match of different elements according to changing circumstances (Le Boterf 2008b; Dolz and Ollagnier 2002; Carù and Cova 2011). There is still ongoing debate about the elements and dimensions composing the phenomenon and their interplay, which has resulted in various taxonomies being put forward.

Penrose’s work in 1959 represented the starting point for the development of a branch of research that conceptualised organisations as portfolios of productive, physical (tangible) and intangible resources, whereby their unique competence allowed for a better use of these resources than were it otherwise. However, the nature of the relationship that ties competence and resource together is still a subject of ongoing debate across various disciplines. Corporate competence is the ability of an organisation to combine and utilise its resources by developing organisational and cultural processes aimed at achieving corporate objectives (Amit and Schoemaker 1993). The unique combination of competences and resources of an organisation represents also a source of competitive advantage for a firm to maintain or improve its position in the marketplace. ‘Core competencies’ are considered to be difficult to imitate and thus, represent a source of added value for the customers, because they facilitate the creation and

distribution of goods and services for them in different markets (Prahalad and Hamel 1990). Buttington (1996) described general competences as general corporate potential regarding the interdependency between the functions, processes and corporate specialised competences. By contrast, specialised competences represent a tangible capacity of actually operating. That is, they are of a technological-productive nature in that they enable the creation of innovative products and services. Moreover, functional specialised competences regulate the functioning of specific activities, whereas process-based ones allow the operation of inter-functional corporate processes. Grant (1995) proposed a classification of three types of resources: tangible (physical and financial resources), intangible (technological resources, reputation and corporate culture) and human (specific abilities and knowledge, communication capacity and interaction).

Despite the varied different definitions and classifications of competences in the strategy literature, these contributions give insights into the relationship between the terms competence and resource. That is, competences are mainly conceived as combinations of knowledge and skills that allow an organisation to adopt its assets and coordinate its processes for the achievement of corporate goals (Penrose 1959; Prahalad and Hamel 1990; Zerbini et al. 2007). Whilst resources are the key corporate assets, which are difficult to transfer; companies, hence, face 'resource position barriers' when there are obstacles to the mobility of their resources (Wernerfelt 1984; Zerbini et al. 2007).

The HR management and education literatures have helped to further the understanding of the link between resources and competences by pointing out the limits of defining the latter as mere additions of resources (Allal 2002; Dolz and Ollagnier 2002; Perrenoud 2002; Durand 2006; Le Boterf 2008a, 2008b, 2011). This argument originated from the critique of a common classification of competence as resulting from *savoir* (knowledge), *savoir faire* (know-how - ability to practice and materialise abstract knowledge) and *savoir être* (knowing how to be - attitudes and ways of being) (Durand 2006). This classification equates *savoir* (knowledge) with the information acquired, interpreted and integrated in the schema of functioning. *Savoir faire* (know-how) represents the empirical capacity to act effectively according to a process and predefined objectives. With the main focus having been upon the previous two dimensions, *savoir être* (knowing how to be) has been largely overlooked. This refers to personal individual dispositions that contribute to shaping not only their approaches to a specific situation, but also characterise the organisation's capacity to face known and unknown challenges (Durand 2006). This reflects the situation that the duality cognitive/behavioural has been neglected in the definition of competence in that the former has been over emphasised at the expense of the latter in the literature (Durand 2006).

Equating competence with these three types of knowledge (*savoir*, *savoir faire* and *savoir être*) has been considered limiting, because the application of an additive logic of reasoning neglects the interdependencies between these three dimensions (Allal 2002; Dolz and Ollagnier 2002; Durand 2006; Le Boterf 2008a, 2008b, 2011). That is, competence results from the combination and interaction of skills and abilities and, therefore, conceptualising it as the mere assembling of capacities is restricting because possessing these does not necessarily translate into being competent (Le Boterf 2008a, 2011). Competence, then, does not only involve the mere possession of resources, but also the ability to mobilise and link them appropriately. Therefore, being competent does not simply imply having a list of resources, for it requires being able to mobilise an appropriate combination of them to perform a task according to the specific circumstance lived by the individual, if the desired objective is to be achieved (Le Boterf 2008a). Consequently, the individual is an agent who exerts a “meta-cognitive control over the mobilisation of resources” (Perrenoud 2002, p.58). Switching from an assembling logic to a combinatorial one entails conceiving competence as organised in a system, whereby:

“It has to be thought in terms of connexion, and not of disjunction, of dividing up, of fragmentation of ingredients. Competence cannot be understood in terms of cutting up the resources constituting it. Dissecting competence won’t lead to its discovery. It is assumed that the development of competences depends not only upon acquiring resources (knowledge, abilities ...), but also being trained in building suitable combinations of them. Competence is, hence, a combination of varied resources that can be put in practice.” (Le Boterf 2008a, p.2)

Competence, therefore, represents an overarching concept because it includes the other notions of knowledge, resource and capacity (Dolz and Ollagnier 2002; Perrenoud 2002; Le Boterf 2011). Being competent entails being able to apply theoretical and practical knowledge, mobilise resources and face successfully a situation effectively so as to accomplish a task (Dolz and Ollagnier 2002). Competences are complementary to capacities in that the latter are corporate procedures that result in automatic answers to stimuli (Durand 2006). That is, whilst capacities can be relied upon for facing known problems through the adoption of organisational routines, competences are critical for enabling the corporation to access and exploit unexplored areas (Durand 2006; Carù and Cova 2011).

The main traits characterising the notion of competence that have emerged from contributions spanning the four disciplines of psychology, HR management, strategy and education reveal the complexity of this concept. To start with, it has an ingrained motivational nature, whereby the urge towards competence represents a human need to gain satisfaction from the mere fact of

feeling competent and thus, being confident that the desired outcome will be achieved (White 1959, 1971; Deci and Ryan 2000, 2008; Ryan et al. 2008; Harré and Bullen 2010). Competence is understandable in light of its context of application and the fact that it is ends driven (Allal 2002; Dolz and Ollagnier 2002; Perrenoud 2002; Le Boterf 2008a, 2008b, 2011). Moreover, it should be conceived in a combinatorial way, because it involves an integrated web of different elements (resources, knowledge, skills, capacities) that can be mobilised and activated in order to pursue a goal (Allal 2002; Dolz and Ollagnier 2002; Perrenoud 2002; Le Boterf 2011).

3.3 The Challenge of Judging Competence

Competence is not only a complex concept because of its multifaceted nature but also because of the difficulties involved when trying to evaluate it. In consumer research studies judging consumer competence still represents a dilemma:

“Who is the judge of what is savvy? Is it the marketer, the consumer him or herself, other people in the consumer’s life or social observers?” (Nancarrow et al. 2008, p.733)

Consumer savvy is one of the concepts adopted in consumer behaviour to refer to consumer competence and its detailed presentation will follow in section 3.4. In general, a consumer is savvy when she/he has technological sophistication, interacts both offline and online with others to increase her/his level of expertise and has developed a capacity to decode marketing communications (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Garnier and Macdonald 2009; Nancarrow et al. 2008, 2011). Moreover, she/he demands an interaction with the production side and nurtures the expectations of firms (Roberts and Manolis 2000; Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Nancarrow et al. 2008, 2011; Uncles 2008; Garnier and Macdonald 2009).

The process of judging the degree of competence displayed by an individual has been mainly analysed in the context of HR management and education. An employee’s performance to achieve the pre-defined objectives in relation to her/his position and role within the organisation is evaluated by HR staff and her/his immediate superiors (Le Boterf 2011). That is, the development along a timeline of competences to be mobilised and improved to achieve goals is a process entailing the participation of the employee, her/his immediate superiors and HR managers (Le Boterf 2011). Similarly, on the school benches, the evaluation of the learning outcomes of a student occurs by assessing the correspondence between the improvement of her/his portfolio of competences and the learning objectives fixed by the school (Allal 2002; Dolz and Ollagnier 2002; Perrenoud 2002). This simplified and brief presentation of the processes of judgment of employee and student competences reveals the organised structures and procedures followed to assess their level of competence. As such, the evaluation of

competence is the result of an interaction between different subjects alongside internal assessment by the subject her/himself. In the context of the marketplace, the evaluation of competence is the subject of ongoing debate, because of the lack of agreed procedures to follow for its assessment.

Companies and institutions, rather than judging consumer competence, support consumers in the process of building up their consumption skills by distributing appropriate knowledge about products and services. Moreover, children and teenagers become socialised within the marketplace and exert their role as consumers under the influence of media, education institutions and intergenerational exchange between members of the family. All these influences help them to acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes directly and indirectly relevant to consumer behaviour (Cram and Hung Ng 1999; Roberts and Manolis 2000; North and Kotzé 2001; Nancarrow et al. 2011). Reading articles in consumer magazines, the popular press and government publications, interacting with the offer side (e.g.. receiving explanations on the difficult jargon in publications by private insurance agents) as well as being the subject of public policies, all strengthen consumer confidence in taking consumption decisions.

If the consumer is the judge of her/his degree of savvy, then she/he may self-assess by using people (i.e. parents, friends and colleagues) she/he knows as a yardstick under the assumption that they have her/his level of consumer savvy (Nancarrow et al. 2008). The display of competence is, thus, a means of social recognition and others judge individuals upon the performance of their practices and the perception that they have of their level of skills (Le Boterf 1994). The judgment by others thus becomes normative and consumers are, in this way, endowed not only with competence, but also with responsibility and authority (Richardson and Ferrell 1972; Reiser 1992; Le Boterf 1994). Consumers' self-confidence in their ability to perform consumption behaviours turns them into value-seekers, as affirmed by Uncles (2008):

“They seek value-for-time, value-for-attention and value-for-access to their personal information. The democratisation of access to information means that consumers have enhanced self-confidence in their ability to perform behaviours related to consumption.” (p.228)

Savvy consumers develop self-confidence by relying on peer reviews and adopting ‘user-directed technologies’, which allow them to impose a higher control in choosing and looking for information online. By so doing, they may come to sense a reduction in the asymmetry between them and the producers (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Uncles 2008; Garnier and Macdonald 2009; Carù and Cova 2011). They consequently will claim the right to be

considered by marketers as worthwhile and knowledgeable stakeholders and expect the firms to respond to their requests (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Uncles 2008; Garnier and Macdonald 2009; Carù and Cova 2011).

If consumers feel they have attained a high degree of competence and thus, contend that have reached a level of brand/product expertise similar to that of marketers, then they risk over-evaluating their level of expertise. They may take less time to search for new information and feel that continuously updating their knowledge has become redundant, preferring to rely on their pre-constructed background. Unfortunately, their prior beliefs may lead to a biased interpretation, because of the adoption of incorrect rules and levels of importance weighting (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). The misjudgement of consumer competence has been framed in the literature in terms of failure to calibrate of individual and interpersonal knowledge (Price and Feick 1984; Alba and Hutchinson 2000; Bertrandias and Vernet 2012). Knowledge calibration refers to a consumer's accuracy when evaluating her/his own knowledge, thus representing the degree of correspondence between the knowledge that an individual believes she/he has and the actual knowledge that she/he possesses (Price and Feick 1984; Alba and Hutchinson 2000; Bertrandias and Vernet 2012). Reflecting upon the assessment of the validity of knowledge adopted in the decision making process by consumers, Alba and Hutchinson (2000) explained the calibration of knowledge as follows:

“Expertise is measured relative to a performance criterion and implies increased ability. A related distinction can be made with regard to calibration. Accuracy is dependent on one's ability or expertise. Confidence is also based on expertise, but other factors, including experience, may influence confidence while leaving accuracy unchanged. Thus, accuracy reflects what we know, confidence reflects what we think we know, and calibration reflects their correspondence.” (p.123)

Consumers who misjudge their level of expertise, by being overconfident, risk taking inefficient purchasing decisions (Alba and Hutchinson 2000; Bertrandias and Vernet 2012). Challenges to evaluate competence are also reflected in the difficulties manifested in assessing the level of expertise regarding the sources of information at hand. Interpersonal calibration of knowledge pertains to consumers' competence to judge the level of expertise behind sources of disseminated information so as to be able to take optimal decisions (Price and Feick 1984; Bertrandias and Vernet 2012). Errors of calibration occur when they misevaluate their degree of knowledge of the source of information by overestimating or underestimating it. Price and Feick (1984) showed that misjudgements of a referent expertise depend upon the criteria adopted by consumers to evaluate it; they tend to choose based upon the similarity with the

source and its accessibility more than the genuineness of the knowledge. That is, they tend to rely on close people, such as friends or family, because of the tendency to select referents based upon equating the accessibility of the source with the credibility of such persons (Bertrandias and Vernet 2012). Moreover, consumers tend to overestimate their capacity to self-assess their skills, both in being able to choose an offer that matches their needs and opting for something they can effectively utilise to achieve their goal (Alba and Hutchinson 2000; Johar et al. 2006; Burson 2007). Not only over-confidence in the ability to purchase a product can occur, but also under-valuation of this can manifest itself when the consumer receives challenging queries from a salesperson, causing anxiety and doubts in the shopper, thus resulting in the erroneous purchase of a less-advanced product (Johar et al. 2006).

A solution to the misjudgements of competence could come from being more reflexive. Reflexivity refers to the capacity to distance oneself from one's own performance and thus enhance objectivity (Le Boterf 2008a). Analysing the situation faced with detachment allows an individual to assess her/his processes regarding the mobilisation of competencies, thereby identifying effective combinations that achieve the desired goal (Le Boterf 2008a). Reflexivity provides insight for the evaluation of competence in terms of assessing:

“the resources that are essential and those that are subsidiary. In other words, the individual should work with «an open mind» and with an open «heart». An open mind will support him/her to examine his/her practices, knowledge, reasoning, and ways of action. An open heart will support him/her to check his/her emotions, doubts and affective implications.” (Le Boterf 2008a, p.55)

The next parts of this chapter (sections 3.4 and 3.5) are dedicated to reviewing how research has contributed to the understanding of what it means to be a competent consumer.

3.4 Consumer Competence as Knowledge to Evaluate Marketplace Offers

Active consumer presence in the marketplace and increased interaction of consumers with the offer side reflect a portrayal of a connected, updated and capable individual, in sum a more and more knowledgeable stakeholder (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Uncles 2008). Consumers are seen as endowed with *metis* “local knowledge, commonsense, cunning, practical skills, know-how” (Macdonald and Uncles 2007, p.498). The description of the consumer as a ‘dupe’ is, thus, outdated because they are no longer passive, manipulated and controlled subjects of the marketing force (Campbell 2005).

The conviction of consumers as subjects able to juggle the different offers and channels has been mainly influenced by the adoption of a decision making perspective in terms of a focus on the cognitive processes implemented by consumers to choose among the different options and prioritise in the use and combination of their resources as well as those made available by the marketplace (Sproles et al. 1978; Moorthy et al. 1997; Alba and Hutchinson 2000; Berg 2007; Berg and Teigen 2009). Consumer competence is, hence, conceived as a means through which individuals undertake purchasing decisions maximising the use of their capacities within the specific context of action. It is interpreted as an effort to be knowledgeable about products and markets by acquiring new information useful in making decisions that satisfy consumption needs and goals (Berg and Teigen 2009). Therefore, a knowledge-focus perspective describes a competent consumer to “be informed about products and to be familiar with how markets function” (Berg 2007, p.418).

Consumer information is, hence, considered the crucial variable to influence and improve efficiency of choice (Titus and Bradford 1996). The first consumer research attempting to conceptualise consumer competence dates back to the definition of consumer sophistication, being defined as:

“an individual’s aggregated level of acquired knowledge, experience in purchasing products, and skills which are relevant to being an efficient decision-maker. Some specific measures of consumer sophistication might include general educational level, number of consumer education courses completed, awareness of brand names, past experiences in purchasing products, self-confidence in purchasing, and level of general knowledge relating to purchase decision-making. If it is valid to assume that an individual’s stage in the life cycle is indicative of prior experience with purchasing and using products, demographic measures such as age, marital status, and family size can also be indicators of consumer sophistication.” (Sproles et al. 1978, p.91)

Gender has also been identified as having an impact on the degree of consumer sophistication. For example, male-dominated markets, like the technological ones, report that being male, young, educated and living with a partner predicts a higher degree of competence in the choice of technological appliances (Berg and Teigen 2009). In the same way, being a mature female without high earnings favours an increase in the acquisition of information to cope with everyday consumption tasks (Berg and Teigen 2009). Moreover, age influences the construction of a stock of competence (Roberts and Manolis 2000; Uncles 2008; Mata and Nunes 2010). Exposure to television programmes and the extent of use of the Internet have exposed the younger generation to a wealth of marketing messages. The result of this is the creation of a

consumer-oriented, consumer-savvy generation, who value materialistic goals and dedicate time and effort to building up capacities and wisdom in dealing with the marketplace (Roberts and Manolis 2000). If young people have the ‘upper hand’ when it comes to technological savvy, greater age correlates with a reduction in the search of information when making a consumption decision; older consumers feel that the avoidance of some information results in a small loss in the quality of the decision (Mata and Nunes 2010).

Extension of the understanding of competence as knowledge supporting consumer purchasing processes occurred with the notorious discussion on consumer expertise by Alba and Hutchinson (1987) in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. These pages are considered as the main reference to define competence in consumer research studies and are focused on the analysis of the psychological dynamics experienced to take purchasing decisions successfully (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). Alba and Hutchinson (1987) demonstrated how expertise improves with familiarity, where this is considered as being the number of product-related experiences that a consumer has accumulated over time and expertise represents her/his ability to perform product-related tasks with success. The authors showed how being expert consumers enhances the capacity to reinforce cognitive structures favouring analysis of information, thus making it possible to differentiate between that which is useful and irrelevant. Expertise is also represented by an ability to memorise information concerning brand characteristics and product features as well as a capacity to elaborate this information across time and according to circumstance. These abilities allow expert consumers to have fewer difficulties when searching for information in comparison to novices and therefore, to pay a lower cost in terms of time, accuracy and dedicated efforts (Bertrandias and Vernet 2012). The difference between experts and novices is with regards to how the former adopt more advanced cognitive processes by having the skill to elaborate a higher number of attributes characterising products, thereby maximising the use of their resources and optimising their brand choice:

“A consumer with a great deal of experience (thus an expert) will have relatively little uncertainty about the attribute values of individual brands (individual brand distributions decrease in variance), even though she has the ability to make fine distinctions on a large number of attributes. This expert consumer's perception of the market therefore gravitates to a totally differentiated brands structure and she will have little incentive to search.” (Moorthy et al. 1997, p.265)

The gathering and storage of information to be used in a purchase is strongly linked with the motivation at the base of the individual actions (Johar et al. 2006; De Mello et al. 2007). This impacts on the processing of information, because it influences the way the consumer encodes

the stimulus as well as her/his modalities of storing and recalling information (Johar et al. 2006; De Mello et al. 2007). Consumers avoid information that would undermine their attainment of their objective and they judge less severely opposing messages (De Mello et al. 2007). Motivated reasoning is, thus, the result of a situation in which consumer self-efficacy is negatively affected, because people lack confidence in reaching their goal; consequently, they cope with this sense of failure by activating a protection motivation response (De Mello et al. 2007).

Self-efficacy is a recurrent term in defining consumer competence as it concerns the perceived capacity of an individual to perform the consumption behaviour and it is one of the dimensions identified in the definition of consumer savvy (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Nancarrow et al. 2008, 2011; Uncles 2008; Garnier and Macdonald 2009). This represents another concept used in consumer research to refer to the competence applied by individuals to search satisfactorily for information and choose the offer that satisfies best their requirements. Macdonald and Uncles (2007) identified the dimensions of consumer savvy based on which they developed a scale to measure its level, the explanation for which has since been extended by other empirical studies (Nancarrow et al. 2008, 2011; Uncles 2008; Garnier and Macdonald 2009). Marketing savvy refers to consumers being aware of how marketers manipulate their materialistic desires, thus making them critical of the status quo of the marketplace (Nancarrow et al. 2008). Consumer savvy, by contrast, represents the ability to engage in a shopping situation where they could maximise efficiency, thereby obtaining the best result within the current offer and conditions provided by the marketplace (Nancarrow et al. 2008). When consumers decide to reward a company by buying its products because of its demonstration of corporate social responsibility (e.g. signing up to the Fair Trade system), then marketing savvy is considerable as an influence upon consumer savvy (Nancarrow et al. 2008). Six main features define savvy consumers:

“they are enabled by competencies in relation to technological sophistication, interpersonal networking, online networking and marketing/advertising literacy, and they are empowered by consumer self-efficacy and by their expectations of firms.”
(Macdonald and Uncles 2007 p.497)

Savvy consumers are equipped with technological sophistication and they have the skills to adopt different technological devices, in particular, navigating on the web (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Uncles 2008). This sophistication is a means to benefit from the advantages of the virtual world. In fact, online networking, that represents consumers' capacity to make the best use of networks online, is favoured by consumers' dexterity when surfing the web and

comprehending the functioning of social networks (Garnier and Macdonald 2009). Bundling together technological sophistication and online networking allows consumers to decrease information asymmetry, because of the capacity to make a wider search for information and, by being connected, have a quicker time of response for their queries (Uncles 2008).

Competency to create and be part of networks can be exerted online, thus overcoming physical barriers, or it can be developed personally by strengthening bonds with known people (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Uncles 2008; Garnier and Macdonald 2009). Interpersonal networking represents consumers' ability to develop personal contacts that are credible and knowledgeable so as to share with them information, advice, opinions regarding the purchase, consumption and disposal of products and services (Garnier and Macdonald 2009). Therefore, having personal and/or virtual ties enable consumers to have a broader source of information and, hence, the possibility of comparing different brand experiences (Macdonald and Uncles 2007). Consumers also build up their degree of savvy by becoming literate in marketing. That is, consumer understanding and familiarity with the functioning of marketing, the capacity to decode marketing communications and reading through advertising all contribute to marketing literacy (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Uncles 2008; Garnier and Macdonald 2009). Literacy is, in fact, another concept later discussed in this section, that adds to the conceptualisation of consumer competence in terms of the ability to interact with the marketplace and make the most of a shopping experience.

Finally, savvy consumers are defined in terms of their level of self-efficacy and their expectations of information flows between them and producers. Self-efficacy, as explained in section 3.2, represents the capacity of an individual to judge her/his ability to undertake a task (Bandura 1977). Savvy consumers score high in their perceived level of self-efficacy, because they feel they have the capacity to exert a major control upon the shopping outcome due to their level of knowledge of the functioning of the marketplace and/or of marketing (Nancarrow et al. 2011). They, therefore, believe they have the right to have a say through interactions with producers and retailers and, hence, they demand information from the corporate side. Consumers' expectations of information flows are based on the desire to be connected with the firms through different channels, real and virtual, and to receive support, information and responses (Garnier and Macdonald 2009; Rigby 2011). In sum, consumer savvy is a concept that directly puts at the heart of its definition the relation between consumption and production by adding the dimension of the consumers' expectations of the firm.

Consumer literacy is important for consumers to interact with the offer side and be able to respond to a constantly changing environment. Literacy skills are usually referred to as the

ability to read and write. This view confines it to just representing the abilities to decode texts and decipher numbers and, hence, it is simplistic as contended by Adkins and Ozanne (2005a). These authors identified also a functional perspective of literacy, which conceives literate people to be able to conduct specific actions despite the context in which it takes place. For example, a literate consumer is able to read the conditions of a promotional offer on a leaflet when sitting comfortably at home and decoding the same information on a placard they see in a supermarket. These two views on literacy are open to criticism, because they depict it as a mechanical procedure that overlooks the process of meaning making within specific cultural and contextual conditions (Adkins and Ozanne 2005a, 2005b; Oswald 2011). A more complete view on literacy defines it as a social practice that goes beyond the simple capacity of reading a text and acting upon the knowledge acquired, for it entails an effort to interpret the text and relate it with the particular cultural setting in which it occurs (Adkins and Ozanne 2005a, 2005b; Oswald 2011). Taking into account the active role of the consumer in constructing and interpreting the meaning of a text, consumer literacy is then defined as:

“the ability to find and manipulate text and numbers to accomplish consumption-related tasks within a specific market context in which other skills and knowledge are also employed. As a social practice, literacy is a public act - not merely a private act of decoding and encoding.” (Adkins and Ozanne 2005a, p.94)

From this perspective, Adkins and Ozanne (2005a, 2005b) highlighted that consumer literacy not only consists of reading and writing skills, but also in interrogating the offer side by complaining when unsatisfied with the service received and demanding their consumer rights be respected. That is, displaying literacy does not occur in a vacuum, for the performance of literate consumers includes and is influenced by the context of action and its regulating norms. The relevance of the context of action in shaping consumer literacy is also demonstrated by the variations of specific types (i.e. computer literacy, financial literacy) (Adkins and Ozanne 2005b). Different studies have analysed different degrees of literacy according to the groups of consumers studied. Decoding skills of reading are at the core of the definition of literacy and justify a stream of literature aimed at unpacking the literacy skills utilised by vulnerable consumers (Adkins and Ozanne 2005a, 2005b; Gau and Viswanathan 2008). The capacity to interpret the symbolic meanings of brands reveals how being literate goes beyond just the skills of reading and writing, for it also includes a disposition to be able to interpret the meanings of texts.

Decoding the marketplace and its functioning presents different challenges, with the difficulties being exacerbated for people who have inadequate reading and writing skills (Adkins and

Ozanne 2005a, 2005b; Gau and Viswanathan 2008). Low level literate consumers struggle to accomplish their consumption goals, because they face difficulties in interacting with the retail environment owing to their deficiencies when processing numerical and text based product information (Gau and Viswanathan 2008). In response, they develop skills to cope with their limitations, such as utilising photographic memory to remember brand logos and in this way identifying the products that they want to buy. However, by so doing, they fail to assimilate the symbolic information contained in the offer (Adkins and Ozanne 2005a). Moreover, they tend to focus their attention on single pieces of information and not to engage in abstract thinking by linking different pieces of knowledge together (Gau and Viswanathan 2008). Improving literacy skills and strategies for dealing with the complexity of the retail environment allows consumers to interact with the marketplace with less anxiety and so obtain their purchasing and life goals more easily (Adkins and Ozanne 2005a, 2005b, Gau and Viswanathan 2008).

The power of reading images has been at the centre of literacy studies not only as a coping strategy to overcome difficulties when reading text based information, but also in terms of consumers' capacity to interpret and attribute meaning to marketing communications and brands (Firat and Venkatesh 1993; Oswald 2011). Regarding which, a feature of competence as reading the marketplace is conceived as the literacy to read branding. It is an ability to recognise, read and interpret the images characterising the marketplace and attribute them meanings. Literacy is also, thus, interpretable as:

“the ability to read and discover connections among seemingly unrelated objects in order to arrive at central meanings. This also leads to the power of understanding. (...) This ability to recognize images and attach meanings to them is at the heart of the marketing culture.” (Firat and Venkatesh 1993, p.235)

Reading behind brands and decoding their meanings is specifically difficult for consumers who are not expert in a product category and they are not so knowledgeable in understanding and recognising the subtleties of distinctions among brands. Oswald (2011) demonstrated how Chinese consumers had difficulties in decoding Western luxury brands as they were unaware of the ciphers underlying Western luxury. She noticed how Chinese consumers felt disoriented when trying to understand Western brands meanings as they didn't resonate with their culture and values, because they were focused upon celebrating individualism and disconnected from an historical context. For brands to become meaningful to Chinese consumers, they have to be connected to their culture and become a means of support to their life projects.

The concepts of consumer sophistication (Sproles et al. 1978; Titus and Bradford, 1996), consumer expertise (Alba and Hutchinson 1987), consumer savvy (Roberts and Manolis 2000; Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Nancarrow et al. 2008, 2011; Uncles 2008; Garnier and Macdonald 2009) and consumer literacy (Adkins and Ozanne 2005a, 2005b) have been reviewed in this section. They nearly all restrict their focus on the acquisition of knowledge about products and services along with the development of skills, like technological sophistication and network competency, as the determinants of consumer purchasing practices. The next section is dedicated to presenting conceptualisations of consumer competence regarding consumer capacity to act as prosumers of their consumption experiences.

3.5 Consumer Competence as Prosumeristic Skills

This section is aimed at reflecting upon the concept of consumer competence beyond its role in the purchasing process and to conceptualise it in terms of the consumers' skills required to cooperate with producers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Bonsu and Darmody 2008; Zwick et al. 2008) and/or become producers themselves (Campbell 2005; Fabris 2008; Cova and Cova 2012). Depicting consumer competence as prosumeristic skills favours the understanding of this concept as a means to gain control over the production process of consumption experiences and a re-appropriation of manual skills.

Prosumers are consumers who engage in production activities (Toffler 1980; Kotler 1986; Moisio et al. 2013). The application of the sovereignty model to understand their consumption experiences is limiting, because of the assumed distinction between the roles of the consumer, as the chooser, and that of the producer, as the creator. For, the relationships between prosumers and producers are more complex and there are more intersections between their two agendas (Beckett and Nayak 2008). Under this lens, consumers as prosumers are treated as innovative and capable subjects who are endowed with the ability to contribute to the enhancement of products and services. Consequently, they represent a source of competence for those firms who try to co-opt them to become their collaborators (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Beckett and Nayak 2008; Zwick et al. 2008). Consumers are, hence, conceived as collaborators of producers and participate in co-creating value with the offer side by engaging in the improvement of the service experience (Bonsu and Darmody 2008). Subsection 3.5.1 below reviews the literature on how consumer competence has been conceived as a possible competitive advantage by marketers. The pinnacle of prosumerism is represented by consumer craftsmanship where consumers demonstrate control over all the phases of the creation of their consumption experience (i.e. planning, forging and polishing the object) (Campbell 2005; Fuller 2006; Moisio et al. 2013). Subsection 3.5.2 discusses consumer competence in light of its productive and craftsmanship like nature.

3.5.1 Prosumeristic Skills to Collaborate with the Offer Side

The diffusion of knowledge, the richness of the information acquirable via the Internet and the willingness demonstrated by consumers to take an active part in the service process, make consumers into competent interlocutors who are aware of their acquired competence and want to have a say in the improvement of their favoured products and services (Geiger and Prothero 2007; Fabris 2008). They are increasingly participating in enacting services (Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Carù 2007) and are engaging in forging products by offering inputs and ideas to the marketers (Auh et al. 2007). Consumers' abilities and skills are, hence, considered by corporations as key assets to achieve competitive advantage, as contended by Bendapudi and Leone (2003):

“This shift in the perspective of companies to viewing customers as active co-producers rather than as a passive audience is captured in the move from "What can we do for you?" to "What can you do with us?" (p.14)

Customers are, thus, involved in the entire value and service process and managers can learn by collaborating and co-creating with them (Vargo and Lusch 2004; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). Co-creation of value and cooperation between consumers and companies translates into the consideration of consumers as a source of competence for the corporation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000, 2004). Marketers become co-producers of value and meanings with the customers (Firat and Venkatesh 1993; Cova 1996; Ritson and Elliott 1999) and they benefit from the opening-up to consumers' active participation (Firat et al. 1995; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Bendapudi and Leone 2003). Corporations and institutions are encouraged to develop collaborative relationships with consumers, because of their creativity and potential valuable input (Geiger and Prothero 2007). The concept of value co-creation:

“extends the established notion that value is created by the firm through mobilization of its external and invisible behavioral assets by placing the consumer at the heart of the value-creation processes.” (Bonsu and Darmody 2008, p.358)

Consumers are collaborators and co-developers of companies and, hence, they have to play joint roles in educating, shaping expectations, and co-creating market acceptance for products and services (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). Co-creation, however, involves physical and psychological risk-taking (Lusch et al. 2007), such as the responsibility to behave as a partner of the company (Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; Carù and Cova 2011; Cova and Cova 2012). Being competent encourages consumers to shape the service experience and, in the meantime, to accept and take responsibility for the eventual risks that this

entails (Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Carù and Cova 2011; Cova and Cova 2012). This collaborative side of consumer competence is particularly interesting to understand in the context of leading a more sustainable lifestyle as consumers have also been given responsibilities to resolve societal problems and, hence, to become collaborators with companies and public institutions, as explained in section 2.3.

The concomitance between production and consumption requires a service production that allows consumers to participate according to their degree of resources (Arnould et al. 2006a; Carù 2007). Moreover, with the appropriate knowledge and skills, this enables them to collaborate with brand managers in the definition of the offer and of the overall experience (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000, 2004; Vargo and Lusch 2004; Carù and Cova 2011). Consequently, firms have to create conditions and platforms for the consumers to be able to interact with the offer side so that they can utilise their competences at their best both for them and to the advantage of the firms (Carù 2007; Zwick et al. 2008). Marketplace interactions, therefore, evolve as the creation of value depends upon the combination between the resources of the corporation and those of the consumer (Arnould et al. 2006a). That is, the latter need to integrate their different resources with the producers during the collaboration (Arnould et al. 2006a; Carù 2007; Lusch et al. 2008; Carù and Cova 2011; Cova and Cova 2012).

Conceiving consumers as resource integrators has led to the development of a cultural resource-based theory of the customer (Arnould et al. 2006a; Arnould 2007). Regarding which, consumers are seen as individuals endowed with operand and operant resources, which they display in pursuit of their life projects (Arnould et al. 2006a; Arnould 2007; Carù 2007). The operand resources are tangible, such as income/inherited wealth and goods that the consumer uses to carry on his consumption projects. They condition consumers' lives and their enactment of exchanges with the market (Carù 2007). Operant resources are intangible; they comprise physical (energy, emotion and strength), social (family, tribal and commercial relationships) and cultural (specialized knowledge and skills, life expectancies/history and imagination) forms. As defined by Arnould et al. (2006a):

“Operant and operand resources closely interact with one another, and shape both consumers' life projects and goals. The configuration of operant resources influences how consumers employ their operand resources and their use of firms' operand and operant resources.” (p.93)

Individuals are endowed with cultural and social resources that they display by creating distinctive consumer lifestyles (Holt 1998; Allen 2002; Arnould 2008). According to the

cultural resource-based theory of the customer, consumer competence is intended to include the resources possessed by the consumer; it does not replicate the difference between competence and resources described in the managerial literature on the concept as discussed in section 3.2. With this difference in terminology, the operant resources can be considered to represent competence and the operand resources are equivalent to resources. Arnould (2008) called for an empirically-grounded development of the dimensions of operant resources as generators of competitive advantage.

Firms are sources of operant resources for the customers that use them to pursue their life goals (Arnould et al. 2006a). For example, brands represent cultural resources that the consumers adopt to build-up their identities (Arnould 2006). Similarly, consumers are an operant resource for the managers, for their skills and expertise in using and experimenting with new functionalities of commercial offers represent an invaluable resource for companies (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000, 2004; Arnould et al. 2006a; Bonsu and Darmody 2008; Zwick et al. 2008).

Despite the different terminologies adopted (i.e. resource, competence, ability), consumers' capacities are considered as one of the elements facilitating the good success of a co-production initiative (Meuter et al. 2005; Auh et al. 2007). If consumers have a clear idea of the role that they are supposed to play, if they have abilities and they have a strong willingness to collaborate with the marketers, then their co-optation by the firm benefits from these conditions in terms of success (Meuter et al. 2005; Auh et al. 2007). However, if they experience uncertainties about what it is expected of them, then they will face difficulties in productively interacting with the offer side; being unable to commit to their ascribed role and hence performing the task (Meuter et al. 2005).

Customer motivation is important in determining consumer commitment to be willing to share time and invest effort in contributing to the improvement of the service. Consumers are motivated to participate in forging a product and/or service based upon several different motives. For instance, they are attracted to engage in production activities because of their curiosity and the actual pleasure and excitement gained by being involved in the activity itself (Fuller 2006). Moreover, they are likely to be involved in participating in innovations, specifically online, because they perceive them as challenges to master thanks to their competency background, which can be developed even further (Fuller 2006). In addition, the possibility to meet other consumers who share with them the same passion and interest for a brand or a product pushes them to be part of initiatives of product/service improvement where their inputs can not only benefit themselves, but also others (Fuller 2006). In this way,

consumers can show off their capacities and gain recognition by other consumers and the company for their actions (Meuter et al. 2005; Fuller 2006). Consumers may be interested in developing further a product or an application because of a need to attempt to satisfy specific desires and personal requirements (Heiskanen et al. 2006).

Further, co-opting consumers as a workforce to improve the offer may end up with a consumer expectation of being economically rewarded for their efforts and work. However, monetary benefits offered by the company may represent a disadvantage both for the outcome of the project itself and for customer motivation, because the latter might question whether the compensation that they receive is adequate. Thus, any stimulus to gain economic benefits may push consumers to run solo and propose their innovations to the best offer (Fuller 2006).

Consumer ability refers to the level of expertise displayed by consumers to engage in service production and to be knowledgeable collaborators with firms (Meuter et al. 2005). As explained in section 3.2, when they feel confident they have sufficient skills to conduct a task then they are more likely to commit to it (Meuter et al. 2005). Interaction between producers and consumers requires a mentality of collaboration that results in the willingness to participate in an exchange with other parties actively (Beckett and Nayak 2008). Collaboration between the parties is favoured by a capacity for dialogue through internalization and sharing of values (Beckett and Nayak 2008; Carù and Cova 2011; Cova and Cova 2012), which acts as “an interactive process of learning together” (Beckett and Nayak 2008, p.309). The coordination of the service process depends upon the dialogue between producers and consumers and the clarification of the tasks of each party, as previously explained; in fact, the service outcome is higher when customers know what is expected from them (Auh et al. 2007). This situation may cause an asymmetry between the competence actually possessed by the consumers and the competence that the managers would like them to hold (Carù and Cova 2011). This unbalance, between the competence that the consumers are endowed with and the one that the company would like them to hold, produces incomprehension and frustration (Carù and Cova 2011).

Consequently, positive dialogue between the institution and the consumer supports the development of the service and contributes to a quality evolution of the service benefitting both (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Hogg et al. 2004; Johnson and Ambrose 2006). Facilitation of communication flow and activation of the creative consumer resources should be preferable to the imposition of control over the service process (Bonsu and Darmody 2008; Carù and Cova 2011). Providing dynamic platforms for consumers’ implementation of their productive capabilities and know-how favours a positive evolution of these capabilities, which affords the

possibility to channel them in desirable ways both for consumers and companies (Zwick et al. 2008).

Creativity is the distinctive trait of consumers who adapt, modify and transform commercial offers (Berthon et al. 2007). For example, Fuller (2006) observed that consumers are prone to be part of practical modifications of products in the context of virtual consumer integration. Their practical skills, problem solving capacities and creativity for challenging the current offer contribute to the modification of prototypes and their evaluation; a process favoured by the affordances of web-based tools. Users' innovations can potentially compete with corporate ones (von Hippel 2001) with the result that companies adopt different strategies towards the competence and innovations developed by consumers. Berthon et al. (2007) identified four different firm stances towards creative consumers (discourage, resist, encourage and enable) where consumer competence can be a means for co-creation as well as co-destruction of value (Carù and Cova 2011). In cases where consumers' innovations are discouraged by companies, marketers are reluctant to tolerate their innovations, but do not openly challenge them for fear of negative word-of-mouth (Berthon et al. 2007). Alternatively, firms can resist by ensuring that marketers engage actively in restraining customer creativity (Berthon et al. 2007). Encouragement of consumer creativity entails a positive attitude by marketers towards innovations brought up by creative consumers, but their judgment does not finish in concrete support and cooperation (Berthon et al. 2007). However, both the parties benefit from the intellectual labour of consumers when customer creativity is enabled by the corporate side and collaboration is embraced (Berthon et al. 2007).

Consumers are empowered by co-creation practices, however, the competence that raises them to the position of co-creators is the same as that which entraps them into producing for the firm (Bonsu and Darmody 2008; Cova and Dalli 2009; Cova and Cova 2012). They can feel that they are being exploited by companies as 'working consumers' due to the valuable potential of their competences (Jeppesen and Molin 2003; Zwick et al. 2008; Cova and Dalli 2009). In fact, co-creation can be a false dawn, because companies can profit from the creative expression and unrewarded labour of consumers, by engaging them in a deceitful equal relationship that is orchestrated to their advantage (Bonsu and Darmody 2008; Zwick et al. 2008; Cova and Dalli 2009; Cova and Cova 2012). Moreover, the expertise that the consumer demonstrates may be used by companies to refine their offers and the result is that the former may need to pay a premium price for the work that s/he has contributed to (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Zwick et al. 2008; Cova and Dalli 2009). That is, companies may capitalise upon consumer competence through the appropriation of their creative output (Zwick et al. 2008; Cova and Dalli 2009). In sum, 'working consumers' may be trapped in the new corporate functioning as

free workers, who are not paid for their labour, but pay a premium price to buy the result of their co-creative work (Bonsu and Darmody 2008; Zwick et al. 2008; Cova and Dalli 2009; Cova and Cova 2012).

A boomerang effect, in fact, can occur if consumers realise that they are being exploited by companies without appropriate remuneration and this can trigger consumer motivation to resist companies and produce alternatives to corporate commercial offers by themselves (Cova et al. 2007; Carù and Cova 2011). Incomprehension and discrepancy between the two parties can transform consumers and producers from collaborative partners to ending up in opposing camps. This results in the generation of a co-destruction of value that can harm the relationship between managers and customers as well as the brand itself (Carù and Cova 2011). Thus, consumer competence represents a double-edged sword in the interactions between consumers and producers as it can lead to value creation as well as value destruction; the relationship between consumers and marketers is, consequently, not always positive, for it can lead to the former feeling exploited by companies and/or acting outside the marketplace boundaries (Bonsu and Darmody 2008; Cova and Dalli 2009).

Resistance towards companies can trigger consumers' desire to become craftsmen of their own consumption. The next section is dedicated to discussing the concept of consumer competence in terms of craftsmanship where this has usually been interpreted in the consumer research literature as an expression of consumer identities.

3.5.2 Prosumeristic Skills of Craftsmanship

Consumer competence can support individuals in creating alternatives to the marketplace and thus to embody fully the dictate of prosumerism. As previously explained, this is a neologism resulting from the combination of the terms producer and consumer, coined by Toffler in 1980. A complete overlap between the figures of the consumer and the one of producer occurs in the cases of craftsmanship (Campbell 2005; Fabris 2008) and productive consumption (Moisio et al. 2013), because of the auto-production of goods by the consumer.

Craftsmen are, hence, prosumers of their own consumption. Craftsmanship entails the capacity to be able to conduct all the steps of projecting, designing and actually making the end-product. Engaging in craftsmanship and productive consumption activities reflects a rediscovery and an appropriation of the art of making by hand (de Certeau 1990; Campbell 2005; Fabris 2008; Sennett 2008; Moisio et al. 2013). Developing handcraft reveals the productive role that some consumers are willing to play and through which they taste the pleasurable state of behaving as *homini faber* (Fabris 2008).

Craftsmanship is referred to as:

“consumption activity in which the ‘product’ concerned is essentially both ‘made and designed by the same person’ and to which the consumer typically brings skill, knowledge, judgement and passion while being motivated by a desire for self-expression.”

(Campbell 2005, p.23)

Moisio et al. (2013) considered productive consumption as an activity carried out by their informants to self-realise and ameliorate concrete aspects of the home, like engaging in do it yourself (DIY) practices. Time and wealth are important resources for the prosumers to achieve their goals of craftsmanship. Consumers find it pleasurable and rewarding engaging in all the process of thinking, creating and realising their artefact and in being able to improvise when dealing with unexpected difficulties or impediments (Campbell 2005; Moisio et al. 2013). They improve their skills of manual labour in the ongoing process of their application and their creativity is fostered by the development of their project (Campbell 2005; Moisio et al. 2013). Prosumeristic competence helps, then, to satisfy the consumer desire for uniqueness (Toffler 1980; Kotler 1986; Fabris 2008). The existence of the Internet is helping to contribute to the development of production skills by enabling people to express and share their ideas and prototypes, and perfect them by getting input from other interested/knowledgeable parties (Moraes et al. 2010; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010).

Engaging in developing handcraft has been mainly conceived in consumer research as an expression of consumer identity, for craft labour has been seen as a means for self-realization and a way to cope with identity conflicts (Campbell 2005; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Moisio et al. 2013). Motivations and justifications at the basis of prosumerism have changed along with societal evolution. At the time when the term prosumer was coined, Kotler (1986) identified the forces that were contributing to it, such as:

“the growth of structural unemployment, the rising cost of labor, the desire for higher quality goods and services, the development of new technologies that enable people to participate in the design of customised goods, and a general increase in education and therefore desire for self-actualization.” (p.512)

Despite the changes in motivations, prosumers remain consumers who actively frame their everyday life by adopting industriousness and creativity to forge the daily existence with invention and their own imprinting of originality (de Certeau 1990; Fabris 2008). A particular

cultural disposition and frame of mind is also needed to operate an appropriation of standardised marketplace offers and transform them in order to express own identity (Campbell 2005).

In fact, engaging in prosumerism has been theorised in consumer studies as a way to avoid the traditional production and market arenas by relying on their artisan skills (Fabris 2008). The competence of creating allows consumers to feel empowered, because of the sensation of being more self-reliant and separate from the marketplace mechanisms. In this way, the *homo faber* is the home maker, who wishes to play a leading role in the marketplace, but refuses to surrender to standardisation and instead engages in craftsmanship as a way to escape “the possible ‘alienating’ and homogenizing effects of mass consumption” (Campbell 2005, p.36). Craftsmanship supports prosumers to satisfy their unique requirements (Fabris 2008) and create an arena where they are the undisputed players (Campbell 2005). Prosumeristic competence favours consumers to actualize tactics outside the direct radar of corporations (de Certeau 1990; Campbell 2005; Denegri-Knott et al. 2006; Fabris 2008; Sennett 2008).

For example, Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) portrayed community supported agriculture (CSA) dynamics as artisan food culture, as opposed to a culture of mainstream organic food. By submitting to a vegetable scheme, community members make contact with the farmer who helps them to expand their knowledge of seasonal food and support their reconnection with the land (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). Hence, the artisanship promoted by CSA is conceived as a form of resistance to the mainstream organic culture, as promoted in the marketplace (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). A quest for self-reliance and feeling of independence is at the basis of the artisanship displayed by these communities; they feel empowered because they are capable of acting as producers of their own food consumption by displaying a degree of control over the source of the foods and the way in which vegetables and fruits are grown (Moraes et al. 2010, 2012).

3.6 Conclusion

The literature review on competence has revealed the challenge to define this concept, because it is so complex (Le Boterf 2008b). Not only the studies in consumer research, but also the contributions belonging to psychology, education, human resources (HR) management and strategy have revealed this complexity. It is particularly so owing to the varied terminology that has been adopted to refer to the different elements (i.e. resource, knowledge, skills). Moreover, education, strategy and HR traditions have, specifically, highlighted the limitations to conceive competence just in terms of knowledge, because of the mobilisation by a subject of different resources and practical skills according to the context in which the task occurs and the goal for

which it is implemented (Allal 2002; Perrenoud 2002; Durand 2006; Zerbini et al. 2007). Consumer research has approached the study of consumer competence from different angles and different terms have been utilised to define it, such as: consumer sophistication (Sproles et al. 1978; Titus and Bradford, 1996), consumer expertise (Alba and Hutchinson 1987, 2000), consumer savvy (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Nancarrow et al. 2008, 2011; Uncles 2008; Garnier and Macdonald 2009) consumer literacy (Adkins and Ozanne 2005a, 2005b), consumer operand and operant resources (Arnould 2006, 2007; Arnould et al. 2006a; Carù 2007) as well as consumer craftsmanship (Campbell 2005; Fabris 2008).

The plethora of concepts that have been identified as referring to consumer competence and the consequent richness and variety in the terminology have exposed the ongoing efforts to theorise competence in the context of consumption experiences. As presented in sections 3.4 and 3.5, the review of the actual conceptualisations of competence in consumer behaviour studies can be grouped into two major sub-streams. The concepts of consumer sophistication, consumer expertise, consumer savvy and consumer literacy all tend to describe it in terms of the consumer knowledge utilised to conduct purchasing practices aimed at satisfying specific consumption needs and objectives, as explained in section 3.4. These perspectives concentrate the study and definition of competence mainly on a single phase of the wheel of consumption, i.e. purchasing. Furthermore, the description of the different aspects of competence as knowledge related to buy tends to follow an additional logic of presentation of its different elements. This is the case with consumer savvy (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Nancarrow et al. 2008, 2011; Uncles 2008; Garnier and Macdonald 2009), where the addition of technological sophistication, interpersonal and online networking as well as marketing/advertising literacy are deemed to contribute to making consumers at ease to take purchasing decisions. The concepts of sophistication (Sproles et al. 1978; Titus and Bradford 1996) and expertise (Alba and Hutchinson 1987, 2000) follow a cognitive decision making perspective and consequently, they suffer from the limitations of concentrating on these processes, conceiving competence in terms of the cognitive dispositions and capacities demonstrated by consumers in their decision making.

The second stream identified in consumer research literature to refer to the concept of consumer competence has been defined in section 3.5 as that of prosumeristic skills, whereby the fusion between the role of the consumer with that of a producer allows for a more sophisticated and challenging engagement with the market. However, the discussion of consumers as a source of competence (operant resources) for companies (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Bonsu and Darmody 2008; Zwick et al. 2008) is mainly directed towards analysing the benefits that consumers' knowledge and skills bring to firms. This is reflected, for

example, by Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2000) focus on how marketers should appropriate consumer competence:

“At a minimum, managers must come to grips with four fundamental realities in harnessing customer competence. They have to engage their customers in an active, explicit, and ongoing dialogue; they have to mobilize communities of customers; they have to manage customer diversity; and they have to cocreate personalized experiences with customers.” (p.82)

The focus is, then, more on the corporate benefits to acquire consumer competence than on its mobilisation in the conduct of everyday lives. For this reason, even although the concept of consumer competence is recognised, it is usually treated as one of the elements to take into account for the good success of a co-productive experience and not the focus of the analysis and conceptualisation. The development of handcraft (Campbell 2005; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Moisio et al. 2013) has been conceived as an expression of consumers' identities and passions. Regarding which, Jaffe and Gertler (2006) have pointed out that there is a widespread lack of consumer 'survival skills' and hence, a need for consumer reskilling.

The research on consumer competence, therefore, presents different interpretations being utilised to define this concept. However, the boundaries between these might overlap as in the case of consumer sophistication, expertise, savvy and literacy in that they focus on consumer knowledge and skills for decoding the marketplace and its communications. At the same time, comparing the concepts belonging to the different streams on consumer competence reveals different focus and perspectives to define this concept. As contended by Batat (2014):

“Competence, is in fact, analysed through a multitude of dimensions and concepts thus enabling, more or less, as grasp of the edges of this complex notion.” (p.29)

In sum, an overarching definition of competence is still lacking and, despite the several attempts to provide one, it remains under theorised in consumer studies (Cova et al. 2006; Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Carù and Cova 2011). This research aims to contribute to conceptualisation of competence in the context of consumers seeking a sustainable consumption lifestyle and, in the next chapter, the aims and research questions guiding this study are presented.

4 RESEARCH AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this study is to explore and interpret the competence considered by consumers to be critical to pursue sustainability goals. The research interest is in understanding the competences mobilised by consumers to undertake a sustainable consumption lifestyle, whilst acknowledging the dynamics of their everyday lives. This piece of research aims to stimulate new reflections on consumer competence by contributing to extend further the theorisation of this concept.

Consumers have been ascribed the crucial role, together with other societal stakeholders (i.e. companies, public institutions, not-for-profit organisations), of contributing to the resolution of society problems by modifying and evolving their consumption choices along with their everyday routines (Beck 1992, 2006; Hansen and Schrader 1997; Iyer 1999; McGregor 2002; Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Harrison et al. 2005; Seyfang 2005). The majority of contributions have framed consumer engagement in the sustainability agenda as a decision making process and have concentrated upon mapping the cognitive processes followed by consumers (Pieters 1991; Olander and Thøgersen 1995). Education and provision of information have represented the main attempts to prompt consumers to buy into the sustainability discourse. These initiatives, however, have not necessarily resulted in a behavioural change on the part of consumers (Bartiaux 2008; Evans and Jackson 2008; Bamossy and Englis 2009). Engaging in sustainable consumption entails, in fact, complex dynamics and compromises with other practices regarding consumers' daily routines (Connolly and Prothero 2003, 2008; Press and Arnould 2009b; McDonagh et al. 2012). Consequently, cultural and social approaches have been called for to unpack the difficulties experienced when trying to commit to a sustainable consumption lifestyle (Dolan 2002; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Press and Arnould 2009a; Soron 2010). This research responds to this by adopting consumer competence as the lens to shed light on the ways consumers strive for sustainability in their daily lives. The specific goal is to understand what competences consumers mobilise and bundle to achieve their sustainability objectives, aimed at benefitting themselves as well as their communities and, to a greater extent, society as a whole. That is, deepening comprehension of the role played by competence in supporting the implementation of sustainable practices will lead to the generation of insights regarding the development of sustainability at the societal level.

From a theoretical standpoint, the objective is to extend the understanding of this concept in light of the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) perspective (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007), by exploring and interpreting how consumer competence supports or hinders consumers in achieving their life projects. Underpinning this endeavour is the desire to shift the definition of consumer competence from a focus on expertise, as found in the cognitive traditional marketing

models, to a multifaceted concept, for it is contended here that the cultural and social dimensions of which could be better understood through a CCT approach to consumption (Batat 2014). That is, the perspective adopted for this study challenges the conceptualisations of competence as a set of knowledge and skills simply enabling consumers to purchase their desired products and services, like for example the concepts of product expertise (Alba and Hutchinson 1987, 2000) and consumer savvy (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Nancarrow et al. 2008, 2011; Uncles 2008; Garnier and Macdonald 2009). In sum, the goal is to reconfigure this concept by including the multidimensionality revealed in this literature review in the context of living a more-sustainable lifestyle and thus, extend extant theory. To this end and to guide the study, the following research questions are advanced:

Research question 1: What competences do consumers mobilise to engage in sustainable consumption?

Research question 2: By mobilising these competences, how do consumers react to the complexity of sustainability?

Research question 1 requires investigation into the nature of the competences utilised by consumers to pursue their sustainability goals whilst conducting their daily lives. More specifically, this involves gaining an understanding of what is adopted and what is the nature of bundles regarding competences that can help or hinder consumers in realising their sustainability ideals and objectives. Framing the study of consumer competence in terms of a mobilisation of competences follows the multidisciplinary definition of this concept. That is, being competent is the result of a mobilisation of different competences by individuals who mix and match those they possess and other resources for the accomplishment of their tasks. The following metaphor is apposite to this:

“mobilising emphasises the individual agency. While competence is transferable, it is mobilised by the agent. (...) We insist, then, on chemistry or alchemy (Le Boterf 1994) rather than a physics of knowledge.” (Perrenoud 2002, p.46)

Investigating the competence supporting the performance of sustainability in consumers' everyday lives not only contributes to deepen the understanding of its nature and its characteristics, but also allows for reflection on what improvements can be brought to it and its application so as to have a positive influence on the evolution of sustainability.

Research Question 2 pertains to the challenges and compromises lived by consumers when undertaking a sustainable consumption lifestyle. That is, it is aimed at investigating the role played by competence in dealing with the complexities experienced by consumers in practising sustainable consumption. The key objective is to analyse how consumer competence helps sustainable consumers to manage these complexities. By so doing, insights will be made not only into how in the contemporary landscape some consumers are striving to live sustainably, but also provide useful information for society as a whole that may prompt their engaging in more sustainable practices. As debated in subsection 2.5.2, consumers experience dilemmas and difficulties in engaging in a more-sustainable lifestyle, for as put forward by Carrigan and Attalla (2001):

“This suggests a problem for the so-called sophisticated consumer. Having so much knowledge today on consumer products can actually detract from, rather than enhance choice.”(p.566)

This research contributes to the debate on the barriers to performing sustainable consumption by unpacking the role of competence and the nature of its complexity. The next chapter contains the methodology, covering the philosophical stance underpinning the research as well as explanation and justification for the data collection and analysis.

5 METHODOLOGY

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological decisions guiding the exploration and interpretation of the consumer competence underpinning sustainable consumption practices. The debate on the ontological and epistemological approaches for studying a consumption phenomenon has been mainly centred on the choice of two paradigms: positivism and interpretivism (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Guba and Lincoln 1994; Shankar and Patterson 2001; Cova and Elliott 2008). An interpretive approach is adopted for this thesis, for it concerns reality that is conceived as socially constructed and multiple (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Guba and Lincoln 1994). Consequently, “interpretive researchers give an interpretation of the reality not the reality” (Shankar and Patterson 2001, p.491) as the understanding of the phenomenon under study results from the interaction of the researcher with the phenomenon itself. This is the reason why knowing is necessarily rooted in the context and, thus, the knowledge generated is time-bound and context-dependent (Hudson and Ozanne 1988).

Consumption is conceived, in this study, with regards to its sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects, thus adhering to the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) tradition (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007). Section 5.2 discusses in depth the nature of the ontological and epistemological approach followed. In line with interpretivism, the methodological choices taken are presented and justified in section 5.3. To unpack the nature of the competence applied to attempt to pursue sustainability goals, it was necessary to sample informants who attributed high meaning and value to their attempts to participate in the sustainability agenda and cope with its complexity. For this reason, the sampling approach was purposeful (Patton 1990), which mirrors sampling approaches opted for in other studies that have contributed to the understanding of the complexity of performing sustainability (i.e. Connolly and Prothero 2008; Hargreaves 2011). More specifically, the informants were selected owing to their participation in activities organised by an environmental organisation called Transition Bath, which is part of the Transition Movement Network (Semal 2008; Seyfang 2009; Semal and Szuba 2010). Phenomenological interviews (Thompson et al. 1989) were conducted to allow for probing and subsequently interpreting their views and experience regarding the competence that they were mobilising to engage in a sustainable consumption lifestyle. Moreover, my attending collective events organised under the umbrella of Transition Bath helps advance the comprehension of the multifaceted nature of competence.

Participant observation was undertaken for such initiatives as guerrilla gardening, gardening activities (at a community nuttery and the Community Supported Agriculture), an outdoor

cooking course, meetings of the food group of the subculture of Transition Bath, debates hosted by public figures regarding sustainable issues and an Open Home Weekend, where home owners who had invested in making their houses more energy efficient opened their doors to interested members of the public. Section 5.4 explains the process of the data analysis followed. Regarding which, the immateriality that characterises the notion of competence represents a difficulty for its identification and definition as it is ingrained in consumers' sayings and doings. Consequently, a hermeneutical analytical approach has been adopted (Arnold and Fischer 1994; Thompson 1997) and the emergent themes are presented in the following chapters 6 and 7. The process of data analysis was iterative, involving reading and rereading the data, in a search for recurrent elements, that were subsequently coded and grouped into themes, thus allowing for the research questions previously presented in chapter 4 to be addressed (Spiggle 1994). Finally, the chapter concludes with the presentation of the criteria adopted to judge the validity of qualitative research and consideration of the degree of conformity of this piece of work to them.

5.2 Ontological and Epistemological Stance

The decision regarding which ontological and epistemological stance to take determines the methodological range of choices that may be effectively adopted. Reflecting upon the ontological and consequent epistemological assumptions is fundamental to taking coherent and consistent methodological decisions (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Guba and Lincoln 1994; Shankar and Goulding 2001). Ontology, epistemology and methodology are, first, described in this section. Then, the debate surrounding the two dominant paradigms of positivism and interpretivism in marketing studies is shown in light of the main ontological and epistemological assumptions supporting these two.

5.2.1 Ontological and Epistemological Debate in Consumer Research

Choosing the paradigm for a study is important in terms of the ways of looking at and analysing the focal phenomenon. A paradigm is the basic belief system or worldview that guides the researcher, with its basic foundations ground in three main aspects, the ontology, epistemology and methodology, all of which are interconnected and exert influence on each other (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Guba and Lincoln 1994). Ontology refers to the conceptualisation of the nature of reality and what can be known about it, which clearly has to be determined by social beings (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Guba and Lincoln 1994). Having established the ontological position, the epistemological considerations are concerned with the nature of the relationship between the knower and that which can be known, as decided from the ontological choice. In essence, it represents the relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon of interest, the nature of the knowledge generated and the view regarding causality (Hudson and Ozanne

1988; Guba and Lincoln 1994). The last link of the paradigmatic chain is the methodology, which is the process followed by the researcher to analyse what she/he has decided can be known and comprises the setting of the research design, the methods of data collection, the approaches of data analysis and interpretation, all of which require justification (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Guba and Lincoln 1994).

Marketing studies are generally structured around two main paradigms: positivist and interpretive (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Goulding 1999; Shankar and Goulding 2001; Shankar and Patterson 2001). Positivism is based upon the ontological stance of there being an objective reality, which is independent from the singular perceptions of the different subjects (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Guba and Lincoln 1994; Shankar and Goulding 2001). The interpretive ontology perspective contrasts significantly with this for it holds that multiple realities exist and that they change over time (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Shankar and Goulding 2001; Tadajewski 2006). These realities are individually, as well as socially constructed, as people are directly involved in the process of their creation and they are the ones who perceive and attribute a sense to them (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Shankar and Goulding 2001; Tadajewski 2006).

The axiological assumptions underlying these two paradigms differ also in terms of the pursued goals. Positivist researchers strive for explaining a phenomenon, whereas interpretivists engage in a process of understanding, which they consider to be a potentially never ending process as their interpretation represents just one and not all possible understanding regarding the phenomenon of interest (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Shankar and Goulding 2001). In epistemological terms, the knowledge generated following a positivistic position regards generalised explanations of phenomena that are context and time free. Whilst, that unearthed from an interpretive perspective is context and time bound as it relates to the meanings, reasons why and motivations linked to the object of the analysis (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Shankar and Patterson 2001). Moreover, under positivism, the view of causality reflects the goal of explaining, because it involves the search for causal linkages between variables, whereas in interpretivism, the attention is directed to the understanding of the holistic picture of the phenomenon, because the complexity characterising multiple realities cannot be reduced to cause-effects relationships (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Shankar and Patterson 2001).

In addition, the relationship between the researcher and the fieldwork reflects the assumptions concerning the knowledge generated and the view of causality. That is, the positivist researcher conceives herself/himself as a singular and independent entity separate from the subject of her/his analysis and by keeping such a position during the fieldwork, can assure the objectivity of her/his process of data generation, thus allowing for valid generalisations (Guba and Lincoln

1994). In positivism, hence, the researcher benefits from a privileged point of observation of the subject of analysis, because of her/his capacity of keeping distance and not influencing the subject (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Guba and Lincoln 1994; Shankar and Goulding 2001). In contrast, interpretive researchers develop an interactive and cooperative collaboration with the subject of their analysis as they immerse themselves in the fieldwork. As a result, they do not assume any privileged point of observation, but they become members of the development of the phenomenon of interest (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Denzin 2001; Shankar and Goulding 2001; Tadajewski 2006).

The criteria guiding the judgment of the quality of a study reflect the goals pursued in conducting the study itself and, of course, the view on the nature of reality and social beings. Positivistic criteria are internal validity (the extent of the similarity to reality and the minimisation of bias), external validity (generalisability), reliability (stability) and objectivity (the degree of distance kept in regards to the subject) (Guba and Lincoln 1994, p.114). By contrast, interpretive criteria for evaluating the soundness of a study are credibility (confidence in the 'truth' of the findings), transferability (applicability of the findings in other contexts), dependability (consistency of the findings and possibility of their replication) and confirmability (the degree of neutrality of the findings) (Lincoln and Guba 1985). As the stance taken for this research is interpretive, these are examined in depth in section 5.5 in relation to the choices taken to undertake this study. Finally, the methodological choices underlying the two paradigms constitute the last brick of a coherent paradigmatic structure. Regarding which, the methodology developed under the paradigm of positivism is founded upon the construction of hypotheses to be verified through empirical tests, whereas the interpretivists employ hermeneutical techniques where the interaction between the researchers and the subjects studied is crucial (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Shankar and Goulding 2001; Shankar and Patterson 2001).

Different positions have been taken regarding the evolution of paradigms in marketing and their degree of commensurability or incommensurability. Davies and Fitchett's (2005) conceptual paper reflected upon the range of positions adopted in marketing studies in terms of the degree of commensurability of different paradigms. The authors identified an integrationist view for which there exists incommensurability between paradigms and another view that advocates a certain degree of reconciliation between these, for as they contended:

“paradigm interplay produces new forms of understanding by stressing the interdependencies between constitutive oppositions. Their approach seeks to embrace disparity to build an enlarged and enlightened understanding of phenomena thus

offering another perspective on paradigm reconciliation.” (Davies and Fitchett 2005, p.275)

Moreover, the authors demonstrated how the usual association of quantitative methods to the positivistic philosophical stance and that of qualitative methods to the interpretive one, although usually applied, does not represent a universal rule. The debate upon which paradigm exerts hegemony over the others is another ongoing discussion. For, whilst positivism has been considered as the hegemonic view in marketing since the late 1950's, the affirmation of the interpretive stream has been increasingly apparent for some decades now (Goulding 1999).

The origins of interpretivism have their roots in the 1980's when a paper by Belk et al. (1989) institutionally and historically signalled the beginning of a stream of research applying a cultural approach to the analysis of consumption, which has been termed the Consumer Behavior Odyssey (Goulding 1999; Shankar and Patterson 2001; Cova and Elliott 2008). They drew from different disciplines, spanning from theology to advertising, to study the sacralisation of consumption experiences by adopting a cultural approach to their analysis. Tadjewsky (2006) differed from this positioning by stating that motivation research was the first of interpretive cultural reasoning. At the basis of these strands of research lies the switch from the conceptualisation of consumers as rational decision makers to their being hedonic seekers owing to the importance they are increasingly attributing towards consumption as an overall experience rather than simply focusing on a specific phase, such as purchasing (Shankar and Patterson 2001; Cova and Elliott 2008). The goal of this research is to understand the meanings of a product or consumption experience constructed by consumers in a given moment of their lives. As a consequence, a cultural approach to the investigation of consumption experiences has emerged and is:

“concerned with the processes and practices through which different market actors produce and make use of products and services as *cultural artefacts*. The idea is to produce cultural knowledge of the marketplace, to study how cultural, social and material realities are constructed through marketplace processes both for consumers and marketers.” (Moisander and Valtonen 2006, p.2)

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is the umbrella name of a stream of research applying a cultural approach to the study of the consumption phenomenon, with the aim being to enhance theoretical understanding of socio-cultural processes and structures related to: consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, the socio-historic patterning of consumption, mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies (Arnould and

Thompson 2005). The founders of CCT expanded the original model in 2007 to reflect upon the links between the previous areas of study identified with the goal of encouraging the expansion of theoretical knowledge in consumer research (Arnould and Thompson 2007).

Research conducted following a cultural approach is interpretive as under this lens consumption is conceived in the form of multiple and intangible mental constructions that are socially and experientially based. The characteristics of interpretive research have been highly debated (Hirschman 1986; Shankar and Goulding 2001; Shankar and Patterson 2001; Cova and Elliott 2008) and the following points are required when conducting research from this stance alignment:

The researcher's position: in all interpretive inquiry the researcher is the primary tool of investigation (Belk et al. 1989). She/he engages with the informants in a detailed and intersubjective understanding of a dimension of consumption. This process of understanding results in an interpretation of the differing versions of reality as encountered by her/his subjects of analysis and not the only interpretation possible. Consequently, the role of the researcher is to focus upon interpreting the meaning attached to the consumption experience by her/his informants in an evolutionary process that requires her/him to demonstrate a degree of reflexivity (Hirschman 1986).

Contextualisation: because of researchers' engagement in the fieldwork, interpretive research is deeply ingrained in the system of values in which it is produced. Contextualisation is essential as the meaning attributed by the individual to the phenomenon is linked to the social, cultural and temporal context (Thompson et al. 1989). Thus, an interpretive research project originates knowledge that is rooted in a specific phenomenon and hence, does not have the goal of producing generalisable and testable knowledge. Under this optic, there is no meaning without context, because this form of qualitative research involves understanding situations in their unique setting and the nature of the interactions there (Patton 1990).

Acculturation (Naturalization): in order to interact in depth with the fieldwork, the researcher has to develop a capacity to appropriate the language, norms, values, rites, behavioural patterns that characterise the subjects of analysis (Goulding 1999, 2005). For, this is the key to achieving closer contact with the fieldwork, thus being able to interpret better the life cosmos in which consumers live their consumption phenomenon.

Fieldwork centrality: the process of development of the researcher's acculturation in the fieldwork evolves thanks to her/his continuous interaction with the field and the behaviours in

their natural setting. In a hermeneutical approach, knowledge and meaning originate from the interactions between the researcher and the informants (Thompson et al. 1994).

Centrality of interpretations: analysis of data collected by means of interpretative inquiry focuses upon the interpretation of texts and/or consumption experiences. Individuals have a reflexive capacity over their practices; they attribute meaning to them and appropriate symbolic representations deriving from their cultural and social context as well as the marketplace (Hirschman 1986; Arnould and Thompson 2005). Hence, the interpretive researcher's goal is to try to interpret these meanings (Shankar and Goulding 2001; Shankar and Patterson 2001).

The previous paragraphs have shed light on the consistency between the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions underlying the two paradigms most adopted in marketing studies: positivism and interpretivism. The fundamental characteristics of the latter paradigm constitute the basis for justifying its choice for the conduct of this study, as is detailed in the next subsection.

5.2.2 Adherence to Interpretivism

The goal of this research, as explained chapter 4, is to explore and interpret the nature of consumer competence when experiencing the complexity of leading a more sustainable consumption lifestyle. To achieve this goal, different ontological, epistemological and methodological possibilities have been examined in order to choose those that can best address the research questions guiding this investigation. Unpacking the complex nature of competence to pursue sustainability is an objective that resonates with the principles underlying interpretivism as the following demonstrates.

Interpretivism overcomes the limitations of adopting a decision making perspective

The adoption of positivistic and cognitive approaches to study sustainable behaviours has been already questioned in subsection 2.5.1. Regarding which, concentration on individual decision-making does not consider social and contextual influences, thereby simplifying the intricacy of sustainable consumption to an analysis of decision-making processes. In prior research, the main focus has been on the origination of models where the relations between the variables are measured to determine the probability of the environmental friendly behaviour to occur. For example, the Motivation-Opportunity-Ability (MOA) model, integrated motivation, habitual and contextual factors into a single model of environmentally friendly behaviour (Ölander and Thøgersen 1995). Under this lens, motivation (deriving from the beliefs/attitudes towards the behaviour/intention/social norm), opportunity (overall and situational conditions) and ability (habit and task knowledge) are conceived as preconditions for pro-environmental behaviour.

This perspective is based upon the conviction of the existence of a reality out there to be examined and on the conceptualisation of consumption as information processing and rational choice. This is based upon the assumption that consumers are, in the same way as from the economics perspective, rational utility-maximising decision makers. That is, economists invariably apply a utilitarian approach to evaluate consumer goods and services, arguing that:

“consumption can be viewed as a functional attempt to improve individual and collective well-being by providing the goods and services necessary to meet people’s wants and desires.” (Jackson 2005, p.9)

This is the view mostly applied in the green consumption literature (Jackson 2005; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Caruana 2007). However, the incompleteness of conceptualising sustainable consumption with the notion of “static, individualistic and rationalistic tendencies” has been criticised because this neglects the “significance of consumption practices as embodying the relations between individuals” (Dolan 2002, p.170). In essence, adopting a cognitive perspective based upon positivism overlooks the engagement in sustainability in terms of a process of evolution of the self, the search for a balance between subjective desires and values, and the social identification with subculture meanings (Dolan 2002; Jackson 2005; Black and Cherrier 2010). Applying a cultural lens to the study of sustainability has been, therefore, proposed as being an enriching path for exploring and interpreting the nuances of attempting to perform a sustainable way of life where consumers are conceived as “meaning seekers” (Dolan 2002; Soron 2010; Schaefer and Crane 2005). For this reason, a cultural interpretive epistemological approach to explore and interpret the role played by competence in consumers’ materialisations of sustainability is deemed most appropriate for this research endeavour.

Interpretivism allows for complexity

The second point that justifies the interpretive ontological and epistemological position of this study relates to grasping the complexity of the concept of consumer competence. Applying an interpretive lens favours the analysis of the multiple nuances of consumption, because of the importance attributed to the centrality of interpretations and the connection between the meanings attributed by the consumer to the phenomenon and its social, cultural and temporal context (Thompson et al. 1989). Thus, within a cultural interpretive approach:

“consumption refers to more than the acquisition, use, and divestment of goods and services. Consumption represents a site where power, ideology, gender, and social class circulate and shape one another. Consumption involves the study of particular

moments, negotiations, representational formats, and rituals in the social life of a commodity.” (Denzin 2001, p.325)

Consequently, studying consumption from an interpretive lens entails transcending the distinction between the phases of purchasing, consuming and disposal, thereby capturing the intricate nuances and interconnections involved (Arnould and Thompson 2005). A cultural and interpretive epistemology is adopted for this study, because it aims to investigate consumer competence in its complex and multifaceted essence by overcoming the limitations of relegating the analysis regarding this concept to only one of the phases of the wheel of consumption. That is, this approach allows for the exploration and interpretation of the ways consumers perceive, live, experience competence in the accomplishment of their sustainable lifestyles. In taking up an interpretive stance, the belief in a unique vision of reality is rejected in favour of embracing a multivalent perspective. This will extend the understanding of the varieties of experiences lived by consumers when tackling the challenges of pursuing sustainability principles given the opposing priorities present in their daily existence.

In sum, adhering to interpretivism has been put forward as the most appropriated paradigmatic choice, because of the conceptualisation of consumption in its social and cultural aspects, its consideration in regards to the entire wheel of consumption as well as the focus upon the varied meanings and perceptions of the informants’ own experiences.

5.3 Data Collection

A qualitative methodology was chosen to conduct this study in line with the interpretive ontological and epistemological stance taken and the research goals. The qualitative methods employed are aimed at deciphering informants’ experience and perception of the lived consumption phenomenon. The adoption of a qualitative methodology is justified because:

“Human behaviour, unlike that of physical objects, cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities. Qualitative data, it is asserted, can provide rich insight into human behaviour.” (Guba and Lincoln 1994, p.106)

The importance of taking into consideration the link between the meanings associated with sustainability and the actual implementation of a sustainable lifestyle has been discussed earlier. That is, in section 2.4 the reasons why consumers are keen to implement sustainability in their lives were covered and in section 2.5, the different streams studying the actualisation of sustainability in consumers’ daily lives were reviewed. Similarly, section 3.2 highlighted the

motivational nature of competence and its ends driven nature. Consequently, a qualitative methodology enables the exploration of the important nuances of the competences mobilised by consumers to point towards a meaningful objective of their lives, which is their own interpretation of sustainability.

Furthermore, the adoption of a qualitative methodological stance serves the purpose of overcoming the limitations of considering pre-constructed dimensions of competence. For, developing a scale regarding pre-defined variables to assess the essence of competence might involve overlooking crucial aspects of its mobilisation by consumers. These considerations bring to the fore the etic/emic dichotomy, regarding which, as, contended by Guba and Lincoln (1994):

“The etic (outsider) theory brought to bear on an inquiry by an investigator (or the hypotheses proposed to be tested) may have little or no meaning within the emic (insider) view of studied individuals, groups, societies, or cultures. Qualitative data, it is affirmed, are useful for uncovering emic views.” (p.106)

This study differs from other contributions on consumer competence that adopted quantitative methods to develop a scale to assess the degree of consumer competence, such in the case of the scale of consumer savvy as proposed by Garnier and Macdonald (2009). In effect, the aim is to investigate, in depth, the nuances and challenges experienced to activate competences, thereby extending the understanding of the ways they are perceived and mobilised by consumers. The richness of insights obtainable thanks to the collection of qualitative data favours the understanding of emic perspectives on competence.

Specifically, phenomenological interviews and participant observations are the two methods adopted to explore and interpret the nature of consumer competence to achieve sustainability goals. The following subsection, 5.3.1, explains the sampling process pursued to carry out the fieldwork and reflects upon the position taken by the researcher throughout the study. Subsection 5.3.2, concentrates upon the choice of phenomenological interviews and their operationalisation. Interviewing people regarding their commitment to sustainability runs the risk of social desirability bias (Cherrier and Munoz 2007; Black and Cherrier 2010; Carrington et al. 2010; Devinney et al. 2010; Eckhardt et al. 2010), whereby interviewees have the tendency to portray an ethical and good image of themselves to the interviewer (Chung and Monroe 2003). Engaging in sustainable behaviours is a topic that is inclined to stimulate social desirability bias, because of the effects that individual behaviours have on the environment, on other people and in terms of the future of the planet (Randal and Fernandes 1991; Auger and

Devinney 2007). Hence, reflections upon social desirability bias are the subject of subsection 5.3.3 and finally subsection 5.3.4 provides descriptions of my participation in events organised by Transition Bath (this subculture is following presented in the next section).

5.3.1 Sampling

To satisfy the aims of the study, interviewees had to be sampled according to their active engagement in sustainable consumption in order to investigate the competence underlying their practices. The same choice of what is termed purposeful sampling has been pursued in other studies directed at investigating sustainability-related issues, due to the requirement that the interviewees are oriented towards conducting a lifestyle that they would define sustainable (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Evans and Abrahamse 2009). That is, purposeful sampling has been adopted with the aim of selecting information-rich cases to illuminate the questions being studied in-depth (Patton 1990). I selected maximum variation sampling among the sixteen different strategies of purposeful sampling because it:

“aims at capturing and describing the central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a great deal of participant or program variation. Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a program.” (Patton 1990, p.172)

I adopted this strategy by sampling members of Transition Bath (<http://transitionbath.org/>), a local environmental organisation whose aim is to build a sustainable future by harnessing the power of the community in the face of declining natural resources and increasing fuel and food costs. Transition Bath is a subculture, part of the Transition Network Movement, which represents a ‘bottom up’ initiative acting upon the implementation of the principles of sustainability. It is definable as a subculture, because it is an organisation which opts for the subversion of the status quo (Goulding et al. 2013) as its goal is to make the community itself more independent and self-reliant, with its members being committed to this objective, although presenting different degrees of commitment to the sustainability cause (Schouten and McAlexander 1993).

The Transition Movement’s purpose is to promote and contribute to the establishment of a more-sustainable society by organising initiatives aimed at raising awareness and community engagement. Their main goal is to support cities and their citizens to move to a low carbon and local economy by building positive and self-reliant communities. The ‘Transition Town’ idea originated from a plan developed by a group of students of Rob Hopkins, a permaculture teacher, in Kinsale, Ireland, in 2005. The concept evolved from being a plan envisioned to

prepare Kinsale to become a self-reliant and sustainable community to becoming a network of grassroots transition initiatives, which have growing rapidly in the UK and internationally (Semal 2008; Seyfang 2009; Semal and Szuba 2010). Every Transition Town is organised into different subgroups that address the sustainability goal from a different perspective. For instance, the energy group (<http://transitionbath.org/energygroup/>) propels initiatives and sensitises the public audience to minimising energy use by directing attention towards eco-refurbishing homes and buildings as well as self-production of energy from renewable and low-carbon resources. The food group (<http://transitionbath.org/foodgroup/>) is focused upon activities relating to the sustainability of producing, consuming and disposing food, such as making the public aware of the benefits of local and seasonal food as well as organising workshops and talks around different aspects concerning the link between nutrition and sustainability. The energy group (<http://transitionbath.org/transport-built-environment-group/>) is focused upon proposing an improvement in the transport system of the city of Bath in terms of favouring walking, cycling and car sharing initiatives. At the time of the data collection, the inner transition group was part of the system of Transition Bath groups. In comparison with the other groups, this was open to all people who wanted to share their experience of the inner challenges and self-transformations that the shift towards sustainability requires. In addition, it did not have any concrete project connected with the community (such as for example, the different guerrilla gardening patches created by the food group or the school energy project led by the energy group to decrease schools' energy use). The members of the inner group met only few times, probably because no practical activity was organised and, hence, it differed from the other groups composing the subculture.

All the people who are involved in the Transition 'universe' share an interest in the sustainability agenda. Participating in Transition initiatives may, though, occur in various ways, such as by being a trustee, a convenor of a specific group, a loyal or casual member of a group, or a participant in activities, such as talks and workshops. A trustee is a person, who is highly involved in the organisation and actively contributes in guiding and deciding the priorities and the path taken by the community. The convenor of a group is the person in charge, who coordinates the schedule of the meetings of the group as well as the practical projects, by collaborating with those in charge and other project members. The latter might attend and contribute to the progress of the projects organised under the umbrella name of Transition Bath on a regular basis or sporadically. Moreover, it is an organisation aimed at promulgating communal wellbeing in line with sustainability principles and consequently, all talks/large events and workshops are attended by a public audience interested in knowing more about sustainability.

The justification for sampling from Transition Bath lies in the specificities of this subculture. That is, the intended nature of my data collection was to identify an organisation where the different people involved had varying degrees of expertise in implementing a sustainable lifestyle and hence, were exercising a range of levels of competence in performing sustainable practices. The spread of the focus of action of the projects implemented under the Transition Bath name, the openness of its membership, and the overarching goal to constitute a change in society through the organisation of different tangible grassroots initiatives made this subculture the ideal sampling context. Moreover, choosing Transition Bath favoured the opportunity to interview people who were motivated by different personal interests to extend their understanding and involvement in sustainability. Furthermore, the multifaceted and grassroots nature of this subculture allowed for the investigation of consumer competence beyond the specificity of a particular domain of sustainability.

The variety of discussions, workshops and talks organised around specific sustainability issues helped to uncover the nature of the development and elaboration of the performance of sustainability in their daily individual lives. As such, the investigation was able to focus on the interpretation of the mobilisation of competences supporting consumers to pursue their sustainability goals within the complexities of conducting a sustainable lifestyle as reported by those engaged in this process. Consequently, this research differs from others that have studied sustainable consumption within the context of community supported agricultures (CSA) or new consumption communities (NCC) (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Moraes et al. 2010, 2012), where the objective has been to understand the essence of the community, its direction and the ability to contribute towards the achievement of its goals (Goulding et al. 2013). CSA are forms of communities that are based on an agreement between consumers and farmers, whereby the consumers pay a fixed monetary amount for the supply by the farmers of seasonally-grown vegetables and fruits. Going further, NCC represent an alternative to the traditional functioning of mass production (Moraes et al. 2010, 2012), because they are:

“beneficial in terms of consumer re-enablement as they offer alternative ways to engage in consumption and negotiate with the marketplace.” (Szmigin et al. 2007a, p.297)

NCC are characterised by a certain degree of entrepreneurship (Szmigin et al. 2007a). Participating in a NCC favours a reconnection of consumers with production origins because of their involvement in production-engaged activities (Moraes et al. 2010, 2012). Moreover, being involved in a NCC allows obtaining a sense of self-sufficiency and strengthening community bonds (Moraes et al. 2010, 2012).

Competence varies from context to context and hence, particular types are required for different communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). However, this investigation is aimed at extending understanding of the ways sustainability is practised beyond the focus on a particular subculture, like CSA or NCC. For, concentrating on analysing the competence inherent in a specific group may result in overlooking the importance of understanding the transfer of skills between different contexts and the compromises arising when doing so. Investigation into the transfer of competences between different contexts and their mobilisation within and between different practices will allow for capturing the overall experience lived by consumers when pursuing their life projects in the name of sustainability (Hargreaves 2011).

In response to these research goals, eighteen members of Transition Bath were interviewed about their engagement in sustainability in their daily lives and their mobilisation of the competences supporting them. The operationalisation of the phenomenological interviews is explained in the next subsection 5.3.2. The sample size was in line with other studies that interviewed a relatively small number of participants regarding their ethical and sustainable ways of living (Connolly and Prothero 2003; Shaw et al. forthcoming). In purposeful sampling, the researcher terminates the fieldwork when a lack of fresh insight from the newly sampled units is recognised (Patton 1990). Reaching saturation reflects the assumption that the phenomenon has been satisfactorily explored. As suggested by Patton (1990), when information becomes redundant then data collection ends because data saturation has occurred. Data collection stopped at the point when no additional insights emerged, which signalled the time to focus entirely on their analysis. The data generated by the interviews are of a rich nature, thus facilitating the discussion of the multifaceted nature of consumer competence, whereby:

“the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size.” (Patton 1990, p.185)

The eighteen participants were aged from their early 20s to late 60s, with this wide age spectrum having been chosen to ensure the possibility of capturing possible intra and intergenerational processes in the transfer of practices (Shove and Walker 2010). In terms of gender, the near-equal gender subdivision (10 women and eight men) hopefully avoided bias due to a major over-representation of one gender over the other (Berg and Teigen 2009). All participants were assured of their anonymity and, therefore, no stating of the specific roles played within the subculture is revealed because, otherwise, it would be possible to identify them. This is also the reason why specific personal details, facilitating their identification could

not been included in their descriptions, that are presented in appendix. These descriptions specify the role of these eighteen interviewees when engaging in sustainable consumption.

To conclude, drawing a sample from within a Transition Town has led to generation of rich data regarding how individuals, who wish to be competent in the conduct of sustainable practices for their personal benefits as well as for community goals, proactively engage in the sustainability agenda.

5.3.2 Phenomenological Interviews

In line with the interpretive epistemological stance, the methodology needs to offer a platform for the participants to express their experiences in their own words (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). Phenomenological interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate technique for capturing consumers' engagement in sustainability, because they could unpack the nature of the competence adopted to engage in a sustainable lifestyle through the perspective of the interviewees. In this subsection, the characteristics of the phenomenological interview are firstly presented, together with explanation regarding the compatibility with the ontological and epistemological positions assumed in earlier subsections. Subsequently, the operationalisation of the interviews is described.

Phenomenological interview as a method

Phenomenological interviews are a method of inquiry that has been widely adopted and discussed in consumer research (Thompson et al. 1989, 1990, 1994; Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Thompson 1996, 1997; Goulding 1999; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Researchers adopt them as a means to dialogue with the interviewees in order to stimulate their descriptions of the different facets of the phenomenon under investigation (Thompson 1996, 1997). Thompson et al. (1989) argued:

“The interview is perhaps the most powerful means for attaining an in-depth understanding of another person's experiences.” (p.138)

Thus, phenomenological interviews have been chosen to explore the multifaceted nature of consumer competence in depth. The focus is on the consumption phenomenon lived by individuals as a “person's life world is a socially contextualized totality in which experiences interrelate coherently and meaningfully” (Thompson et al. 1990, p.347). Phenomenological interviews, therefore, support the researcher in understanding the nuances of the encountered experiences as described by the informants (Thompson et al. 1994; Thompson and Hirschman 1995).

Intentionality, emergent dialogue and hermeneutic endeavour are the essential traits of this type of interview (Thompson et al. 1989, 1990, 1994; Goulding 1999). Intentionality refers to the focus upon the experience as described by the informant and as a consequence, the experiential categories of the interviewees are primary to the conceptual ones of the researcher (Thompson et al. 1989, 1990; Thompson 1996; Goulding 1999). In essence, the goal is to overcome pre-constituted conceptualisations to embrace the informants' ways to live the consumption under investigation (Goulding 1999). Emergent dialogue occurs between the interviewer and the interviewee, because the flow of the interview follows the interviewee' narration and not a strict pre-planned order of questions (Goulding 1999; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Hermeneutic endeavour relates to the process of interpretation adopted; analysis follows a continuous back and forth process of interpretation of the texts by relating the single interviews to the whole of their number (Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Goulding 1999).

Descriptions of the practices as given by the informants are, then, considered as the experience itself (Thompson et al. 1989). Phenomenological interviews are, hence, a method that resonates well with the challenge to study competence. The immateriality of this concept is difficult to grasp, as explained in section 3.2. Prompting informants to speak about their materialisation of sustainability favours the description of the role played by competence in enabling sustainable practices as well as its nature. Adopting an emic approach supports, in fact, the understanding of competence as it acquires meaning in relation to the goal for which it is mobilised and its context of action (Batat 2014). In describing their engagement in sustainability, informants reveal the "toolbox" mobilised to perform sustainable consumption practices and the relative challenges faced. Thus, the multifaceted and complex nature of the consumer competence (toolbox) emerges in the descriptions by the interviewees of the ways they pursue sustainability. In HR management, competence is also investigated by pushing interviewees to describe the operationalisation of their tasks. Regarding which, Le Boterf (2008b) stated that:

"A professional practice is a combination of decisions, actions and interactions actualised by a subject in regards to a prescribed activity. A practice is then observable and narrated. It results in a story tale, because it transforms events in history and it is not just limited to a process of data recording. It describes the specific way in which the subject acts. (...) Narrating own performances pushes the individual to self-analyse her/his practices." (p.35)

Interviewing consumers on the way they pursue their sustainability ideals, hence, encourages the emergence in their descriptions of the web of competences mobilised and their interactions

with these to accomplish sustainable practices. The following part of this section discusses the operationalisation of the interviews for this research.

Operationalisation of the Interview

In line with the guidelines set by Thompson et al. (1989), the interviews were conducted whilst respecting ethical issues. That is, before the beginning of each, I explained the goals of the project to the interviewee and obtained informed consent to audio-record our conversation, whilst assuring them of their anonymity. Subsequently, the protection of the respondents' confidentiality was taken into account throughout all the stages of the study, both the quotes reported in the findings chapters and the portraits reflect this effort to respect their privacy. Moreover, life story details were voluntarily shared by the informants in their descriptions of sustainability as the bedrock of their existence, but not disclosed to any other party in ways that would lead to a particular individual being attributed to a specific life story. The choice of the location of the interview was at the discretion of the interviewees so that they could choose a place where they could feel comfortable. In fact, the majority of the interviews were conducted in the interviewees' homes, which meant as a consequence that I could observe the materials adopted by the interviewees to perform their sustainable practices and the relative specific areas where these practices occurred. For example, limiting energy use was pursued through solar panels and wood burning stoves, whilst re-appropriating self-reliance was practised in equipped kitchens where interviewees used to cook, utilise their sewing machines or benefit from sustainable practices in their gardens. Only three interviews happened in a location outside the homes and were in cafés where the interviewee liked spending his/her free time or where the sustainability ethos was reflected in Fair trade and organic products being on offer.

The objective of the interview was to obtain a first-person description of the interviewees' materialisation of their sustainability ideals. As with all phenomenological interviews, the course of the discussion was set by the interviewees; hence, there was not a precise protocol for the specific questions to be posed or their order (Thompson et al. 1989, 1990, 1994). The dialogue between myself and the interviewees was circular rather than linear. That is, my specific questions and comments originated as a result of the descriptions by the interviewees of their implementation of sustainability in their lives and the nature of the competences that they adopted and combined to achieve their sustainability objectives. In essence, a predetermined path of questions was not used, because "the interview is intended to yield a conversation, not a question and answer session" (Thompson et al. 1990, p.347).

The only exception to this logic was the opening question; for each interview, the first question linked the life of the interviewee with the object of the study (McCracken 1988). Regarding

which, I asked the interviewees what sustainability represented in their lives, then following their answers and the succeeding dialogue other questions arose (Thompson and Tambyah 1999) regarding the ways they practised sustainability and the competences they mobilised to do so. The interviewees explained their engagement with this process by describing particular experiences of purchasing, consuming, and disposing to meet their sustainability goals. In line with the conduct of phenomenological interviews, I appropriated the informants' responses to formulate:

“short descriptive questions and/or clarifying statements to provide an opening for a respondent's lengthier and detailed descriptions.” (Thompson et al. 1989, p.139)

In this way, I obtained a rich and detailed explanation of the interviewees' experiences of sustainability and the deployment of a web of competences to do so. The interviews lasted between one hour and three and a half hours; all being audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

I conducted the interviews by making the participants feel that they were the experts on their own experiences and interpretations of sustainability (Thompson et al.1989). The interviewees knew that I was new to the sustainability agenda, owing to my only recently participating in Transition Bath events, and hence, they explained in detail what their interpretation of sustainability is as well as how far they felt they were achieving their sustainability goals.

5.3.3 Coping with Social Desirability Bias

Interviewing people on their consumption experiences regarding a major societal matter, like sustainability, has a propensity to be subject to social desirability bias, which refers to:

“the tendency of individuals to deny socially undesirable actions and behaviours and to admit to socially desirable ones (Zerbe and Paulhus, 1987). Social desirability bias is the tendency of individuals to underestimate (overestimate) the likelihood they would perform an undesirable (desirable) action.” (Chung and Monroe 2003, p.291)

The tendency to declare positive intentions and attitudes regarding a sensitive topic reflects an innate human desire to be perceived as a good individual and citizen. Consequently, the social impact that sustainability has on society being seen as a good act requires the researcher to take into account the possibility that the interviewees are providing answers geared towards match their notion of social desirability (Randal and Fernandes 1991; Chung and Monroe 2003; Auger and Devinney 2007; Carrington et al. 2010). The possibility of encountering social desirability

bias is, hence, an aspect to bear in mind when studying ethical and sustainable consumption issues (Randal and Fernandes 1991; Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Carrington et al. 2010).

As it has been explained in subsection 2.5.1, those adopting a cognitive decision-making approach to study sustainable consumption may have attributed excessive importance to intentions and attitudes as predictors of behaviours owing to the high number of socially desirable answers captured in these studies (Davies et al. 2002; Jackson 2005; Carrington et al. 2010). In particular, consumers tend to exaggerate their engagement in sustainable practices when asked to fill in self-reported behaviour surveys (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Auger and Devinney 2007; Carrington et al. 2010; Eckhardt et al. 2010). Devinney et al. (2010) highlighted how:

“the vast majority of research on social consumption uses simple intention scales that do not account for the extent to which actual behaviour involves trade-offs of valuation.” (Devinney et al. 2010, p.173)

Consequently, interpretive qualitative methodologies have been recently preferred to quantitative ones to surmount the problem of social desirability bias. These qualitative methodologies allow for the investigation of informants' processes of sense making and hence, exploration in greater depth regarding the links between their conceptualisations, reactions and behaviours (Cherrier and Munoz 2007; Black and Cherrier 2010; Carrington et al. 2010; Devinney et al. 2010; Eckhardt et al. 2010).

Social desirability bias was monitored when conducting this study. Firstly, it is my belief that the interviewees felt at ease in sharing with me their experiences in leading a sustainable lifestyle, because of my participation in Transition Bath events (as explained in the next subsection 5.3.4). That is, they perceived me as a bona fide researcher who was conducting a study on sustainable consumption with a genuine interest in discussing the challenges involved and without prejudgment, which led to a higher level of trust than were it otherwise. This truth-seeking dimension, as explained in subsection 5.3.1, could be attributed to a core focal group called that had been founded with the aim to discuss the personal and spiritual transformations experienced in pursuing sustainability goals. Consequently, the personal discussions about the paths and difficulties encountered were ongoing at the communal level, which becomes clearly apparent in the following empirical chapters.

In sum, I am of the opinion that the informants for this research were authentic in terms of their honesty and this led to the minimisation of any social desirability bias. That is, they did not

present a tendency to portray to me that they were doing better and bigger compared to what the reality was, because they wanted me to understand, warts and all, the challenges they were facing in trying to pursue a sustainable lifestyle.

5.3.4 Participant Observation

To enrich the insights gained from the interviews, I participated in events organised under the umbrella name of Transition Bath. The choice to be a participant observer in these activities allowed me to familiarise myself with the meanings and practices associated to sustainability by the informants. Moreover, I could observe the mobilisation of competencies in action. In the following paragraphs I explain the suitability of participant observation to this study and clarify my position as a researcher. Furthermore, the events in which I participated are described as well as their being justification for their choice.

Familiarisation with the field and my position as a researcher

Observation enables the understanding of cultural and social practices rather than cognitive decision-making processes (Belk et al. 1989; Arnould and Wallendorf 1994) and participant observation favours the understanding of behavioural complexity. It supports the investigation of:

“patterns of product and use substitution, (...), active socialization and indirect learning, and enactments of culturally patterned consumption norms and values.”
(Arnould and Wallendorf 1994, p.486)

Thus, participating in Transition Bath events allowed for the comprehension of the sustainability principles and goals that the informants were pursuing to conduct their lifestyles. Moreover, it complemented the understanding of the sources utilised by the informants to enhance their capacity to undertake sustainability. For example, the collective activities of gardening enabled the development of growing skills and production of local vegetables and fruits through which the participants were responding to environmental sustainability goals by limiting their carbon footprints. At the same time, they addressed social sustainability by feeling part of a communal intent by sensitising public audiences to the social benefits of becoming more self-reliant.

In essence, participant observations enabled a richer and deeper understanding of the ways informants tackled the complexity of carrying out sustainability and constituted an opportunity to observe how they developed and shared their skills to perform sustainable practices, like gardening, cooking, and controlling energy use. Thus, the focus was not to gain insight into the

Transition Bath culture and its subcultural beliefs, but to complement the understanding of the implementation of sustainability goals by the informants. Consequently, this work differs from studies that have concentrated upon immersion so as to understand community cultures, such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and New Consumption Communities (NCC) (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Moraes et al. 2010, 2012).

The role of the researcher is crucial in conducting participant observation (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Fetterman 1998; Elliott and Jankel-Elliott 2003), for she can be involved either passively or actively. Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003) reflected upon the blurring boundaries between the possible positions that the researcher can assume. Basing their analysis upon the work by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), these authors contended that:

“the ideal approach attempts to minimise the effects of the researcher on the researched and maximises the depth of information that is obtained.” (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott 2003, p.217)

In the case of participant observation, the researcher becomes an insider by accessing the so-called “backstage” areas over a span of time spent to acculturate into the field (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). In essence, the researcher needs to familiarise herself with the meanings and values attributed to the phenomenon by the informants so as to avoid any misunderstandings (Fetterman 1998).

My process of familiarisation into the field has been gradual as, at the beginning, for my personal involvement with sustainability was limited to waste recycling and purchasing of Fair Trade products. This ‘distance’ has enabled me not to take anything for granted and to grasp details that otherwise would have been unnoticed (Arnould et al. 2006b). However, a process of familiarisation was necessary to enrich the understanding of what sustainability represented to the informants and to be recognised as a researcher who was dedicated to understand the complexities and difficulties to pursue the various dimensions of sustainability. As discussed in the previous subsection 5.3.3, the process of familiarisation and the participation in Transition Bath activities facilitated the interaction with the informants and helped to make them feel at ease so that they would share their implementation of sustainability more freely.

I attended debates organised around particular sustainability issues become cognisant of the complexity of the sustainability cause and the sources of competence influencing the informants. These debates were called “Transition Talks - Inspiration for Action to create strong, low carbon communities.” They were organised to sensitise public audiences with

regards to a particular aspect of sustainability and they were always held at the same location in central Bath, where experts shared their experience and provided tips for achieving sustainability. Satish Kumar was the public figure debating the question: “How can we change ourselves to lead low impact lives?”, who is the Editor of Resurgence Magazine and also an international teacher of reverential ecology, holistic education and voluntary simplicity. During his talk, he shared his experience with the audience regarding his life, his pilgrimages and his convictions regarding sustainability and the ways to attain it. In his case, the move towards a low impact lifestyle was conceived in terms of personal and emotional transformation, with his attention being directed towards the role played by spiritual beliefs in shaping ecological awareness as well as reconnecting with nature. Attending this talk was useful for my understanding of the importance attributed to sustainability by the informants in that I became aware that they mainly conceived sustainability as a way of life. In fact, some of them referred to Satish Kumar and his books as an inspiration for their adopting the sustainability path.

The experiences narrated by the experts in these talks, hence, represent a source of competence and insight for the materialisation of sustainability ideals. “How can we grow more food locally?” was another talk that I attended, which was a source of knowledge on sustainability for the informants. Pamela Warhurst was the chair of this talk and shared her experience in implementing the project Incredible Edible, which is an initiative of voluntary gardening that exploits unused patches of land in the town of Todmorden, West Yorkshire. This project has the aim of stimulating citizens to care for their town and environment by engaging in growing local food for free usage, which means that unproductive land is being used for the benefit of the whole community. Consequently, at this event the public audience was being introduced to the sustainability discourse through a grassroots hands-on initiative rather than a top-down abstract educational activity. This talk was an inspiration for the guerrilla gardening activities carried out by some of the informants, which help them to reflect upon the different ways to promote the materialisation of sustainability principles, as explained in chapter 6.

“How can we create a zero waste city?” is another Transition talk that fostered my understanding of what engaging in sustainability meant for the informants. Julie Hill, the author of “The Secret Life of Stuff: A Manual for a New Material World”, discussed the costs and the environmental effects of the accumulation of possessions. She highlighted how the production of waste has systemic origins generated by the conjoint action of individuals, community groups and businesses. At the same time, she envisioned how the collaboration with these stakeholders could decrease the degree of waste produced. This talk galvanised the audience’s knowledge about product life cycles and the effects of production and distribution methods on the environment.

Finally, I attended a debate organised in collaboration between Transition Bath and “The green house project,” an environmental building consultancy. This talk demonstrated how technology and insulation could help reduce energy use, another area in which the informants engage to perform sustainability in their daily lives. The expert explained the different possible projects that can be implemented to decrease energy, such as the installation of solar panels. Moreover, he explained the benefits of greening roofs in terms of reduction of energy bills and the creation of a new wildlife habitat. Attending this talk familiarised me with the technical language and technology utilised by the informants to manage technology to materialise their sustainability ideals.

My process of familiarisation with sustainability issues occurred over a period of time and participating in these activities complemented my prior understanding of what sustainability meant for people like the informants. In particular, the goal was to gain insights into the sources of influence and the practices in which the participants engaged. However, this familiarisation in the field was achieved while maintaining a degree of detachment so as to analyse the collected data with a critical eye (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Arnould et al. 2006b). Nevertheless, my proximity to the informants’ experiences inevitably had an impact on the research setting. That is, I had multiple influences on the research process and the research process affected me (Rinallo 2011, 2013), which I had to take into account when reporting the data analysis.

The following paragraphs describe the events that I attended as a participant observer and where I engaged in practical activities, besides attending the previously described talks. The insights gained from these experiences enriched my understanding of the information provided during the interviews, because the interviewees referred to these activities extensively and I had good knowledge about what they were talking about.

Participant observation in Transition Bath events

I chose to participate in events that covered various sustainable practices implemented by the informants. The goal was to obtain rich insights regarding the ways competence is mobilised and transferred in relation to a variety of different sustainable practices. “Open Home Weekend” is an initiative organised to inform the public about refurbishing and insulating homes to decrease energy use. Transition Bath sponsored this event, together with Bath Preservation Trust and Bath & North East Somerset Council, to demonstrate a variety of energy efficiency measures, from low to high cost technology. Bath homeowners who had invested in making their houses more energy efficient held open house to show what they had done and

how. That is, they gave tours of their house to explain to what they had done to transform the house and reduce the use of energy.

I visited three houses and in all the three cases a similar scenario occurred. The owners gave the tour of the house to a small group of visitors at a time and explained what energy saving actions they had taken by explaining the thickness of the glazing (for example, double or triple), the type of loft insulation (for example, sheep's wool) and how they had implemented draught proofing. Moreover, they shared their experiences regarding the installation devices to monitor the use of energy, heating sources (for example, wood burning stoves) as well as systems providing energy for the house (for example, solar panels). The owners explained the benefits of energy saving that they gained thanks to these improvements. I took part in the tours and listened to the descriptions given by the home owners and observed the interactions between them and the visitors, who usually asked questions concerning their personal requirements and interests. If not already specified by the owners, they would also ask about the brands of the devices (for example, an energy efficient boiler) and the company names in charge of the projects of refurbishment and insulation. Consequently, competence transfer occurred during this initiative on different layers. The visitors would improve their knowledge regarding the possible improvements that they could apply to their houses to reduce energy use. Moreover, they extended their awareness about brands and company names that they could trust to achieve their sustainability goals. In addition to the participant observation in these three houses participating in this event, I visited the Building of Bath Collection in The Paragon, which has been refurbished with LED lighting, and functioned as the hub for information about such sustainable activities as well as the place where the public could book their visits to the 'energy-efficient homes.' Here, I was able to observe citizens looking at the explanatory posters and enquiring about the best light bulbs to use in their homes so as to conserve energy. Consequently, they increased their knowledge on how to reduce energy waste by taking appropriate measures.

Gardening and growing are two other practices which the informants engaged in as sustainable practices and through which they attached both environmental and social sustainability meanings. In essence, committing to producing local food was supported by the environmental motives of reducing carbon footprints and the preservation of local varieties of vegetables and fruits. At the same time, these practices were a means to spread the sustainability discourse to a wider audience and contribute to creating a sense of community. I participated in planting berry bushes in a nuttery established through a partnership between Transition Bath and the National Trust, which is open for the local community to go and pick the produce. The food group initiated this project to stimulate a sense of sharing and co-ownership of the land and its harvest

among the local people. Participating in two meetings and a session of seeds planting, organised by the community supported agriculture (CSA), allowed for insights into the connection between sustainability and community building being acquired. These two meetings, organised by the CSA of Transition Bath, “Dry Arch Growers,” had as their goal explanation about the characteristics of the CSA and the benefits that it could provide for the local community. Moreover, my attendance meant I was made cognisant of how the founders of the CSA were encouraging public participation by promoting the benefits of growing local food, restoring a patch of land that had always been a symbol for the community and supporting an organic growing system. Moreover, they put forward various ways in which they could become involved in developing and supporting the CSA, including sharing growing skills and signing up for vegetable box deliveries. In addition to observing how the promotion of the values underlying the CSA was undertaken, I participated in a session of planting seeds in the reclaimed land, which made me aware of the subdivision of tasks among the different participants. That is, some were delegated to planting seeds, others took care of planting courgettes, some cleared the ground of weeds, and a few were building a shelter for the tools.

Workshops are other platforms where the development and transfer of competence occurs, because experts can share their skills on how to lead a more sustainable lifestyle with others. On one occasion, I participated in an outdoor cookery course in the garden of the Bath Organic Group, being taught the basic skills necessary for producing a wholesome meal. This group promotes sustainable local food production and organic gardening in and around Bath. This particular event, involving the sharing of practical skills between the initiator and those in attendance took the form of a pre-planned course. That is, the knowledgeable leader explained the technical characteristics of the different cooking devices utilised, including an earth oven, rocket stove and a Dutch oven. The explanation of the features and ways of using these devices extended participants’ awareness of a variety of outdoor cooking methods. As such, the workshop was an opportunity for the participants not only to extend their understanding of outdoor cooking devices but also to try them out in practice. Vegetables and edible flowers picked directly from the garden were used to demonstrate the ties between cooking, foraging and gardening when striving to achieve sustainability.

Finally, I attended twelve meetings of the food group, which held at the same location in one of the members’ houses and invariably followed a similar script. Firstly, the members were given a cup of organic tea, Fairtrade coffee or a glass of apple juice, which was produced using the bottling equipment at disposal of the group. This simple convivial sharing demonstrated how sustainability ideals were not only at the core of the projects organised by the group, but also reflected in the products that they consumed. During the meetings, we were seated in a circle,

and the conversation revolved around the projects to be implemented and their actualisation. The food group tackled sustainability issues in terms of food production, consumption and disposal, with the main focus being on reviewing the progression of the various ongoing projects (i.e. organisation of workshops, outdoor cookery course, apple pressing demonstrations). Other initiatives were aimed at sensitising public towards the production and consumption of local food by organising gardening activities at the nuttery and in other city areas. Furthermore, the initiatives also covered the food disposal practices of FareShare, which is a national organisation that re-distributes excess produce from food wholesalers to organisations working with those in need. The discussions during the meetings revolved around the concept of competence in a variety of ways. It became apparent that those in charge of the projects had the relevant conviction and expertise. For example, the people in charge of the guerrilla gardening activities invested time and energy in growing things in terms of their environmental and social benefits. At the same time, they were skilled in gardening, planting as well as being knowledgeable about seasonal vegetables and fruits, being willing and able to share these skills with potential novice gardeners. Discussion about food consumption practices and their effectiveness in terms of sustainability led to the identification of workshops needed to provide practical skills (i.e. techniques for preserving home-grown produce, outdoor cooking, fruit tree pruning and apple pressing). Finally, discourses around food waste prompted the group to take part in the FareShare scheme, develop knowledge regarding the life cycles of food products as well as increase its understanding of the interactions between the different stakeholders involved in food supply chains.

In sum, my participating in the events organised by Transition Bath, helped in the interpretation of competence emerging from the interviews in that I was provided with a clear practical understanding of how the participants were enacting the materialisation of their projects on their path towards achieving a sustainable lifestyle. Finally, the field notes of the events in which I participated consisted of descriptions of the places where the events occurred, the sustainability aspects that represented the focus of the event, and the competencies in terms of knowledge and skills that were put forward and/or mobilised.

5.4 Data Analysis

The objective of data analysis is to move beyond the mere description of a phenomenon so to reveal a fuller understanding of its characteristics (Thompson et al. 1989) and thus, analysing data in an interpretive way means to ‘make sense of the data’. A good interpretive framework:

“liberates the imaginative powers of researchers and enables them to see the everyday marketplace reality in new ways (...). In other words, it enables researchers to

problematize, challenge and make revised accounts of the taken-for-granted marketplace reality.” (Moisander and Valtonen 2006, p.103)

The researcher is, then, a tool to select, analyse and interpret data (Spiggle 1994). The data in this case have been analysed through hermeneutics, as explained in subsection 5.4.1. In line with other contributions focusing upon the examination of sustainable consumption, hermeneutical analysis has been chosen because it allows for unpacking the intricate nature of sustainability, in terms of its conflicts and hidden meanings. Following Spiggle (1994), the coding process is presented in subsection 5.4.2.

5.4.1 Hermeneutical Analysis

Hermeneutics is “broadly speaking a theory of the interpretation of meaning” (Shankar et al. 2001, p.440). The transcripts of the interviews have been analysed through a hermeneutical lens, because this can comprehensively uncover the relationships between personal and cultural sense making (Thompson et al. 1994). In the context of the current research, hermeneutical analysis allows for the unearthing of consumers’ experiences in relation to their life goals and beliefs (Thompson et al. 1989). The benefits of applying a hermeneutical approach to investigate sustainable consumption are:

“to understand social consumption as it goes on unnoticed - a ubiquitous aspect of day-to-day behaviour. (...) By applying an in-depth hermeneutic analysis, we are endeavouring to reveal what is being hidden from view and covered up by the consumer.”

(Devinney et al. 2010, p.119)

Consumer competence is, in effect, immaterial and omnipresent when conducting consumption practices and because of its nature, difficult to grasp (Carù and Cova 2011). Hence, the chosen approach helped me to unpack the intangible nature of this competence according to the interviewees’ perspectives. Thus, hermeneutics favours the understanding of its complex nature.

The hermeneutical process has an iterative nature, which is usually referred to as the hermeneutic cycle (Thompson et al. 1989) and it involves following a part-to-whole procedure (Thompson et al. 1990, 1994). In essence, the researcher, firstly, tries to obtain a holistic understanding of the singular interview (Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Next, she/he compares the various transcripts to identify similarities and differences and hence, attributes a sense to the data set in its entirety (Thompson et al. 1989; Arnold and Fischer 1994; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). This iterative logic entails a

continuous back-and-forth process of analysis that connects a part of the text to its whole (Thompson et al. 1990). Consequently, interpretation is an ongoing process where new insights are gained from later interviews and re-reading reshapes and enriches previous interpretations (Thompson et al. 1990, 1994). I followed this iterative logic to analyse the data.

The iterative nature of hermeneutical analysis is also reflected in the continuous parallelisms between theory and field. In essence, continuous reflections occur regarding similarities and/or differences between existing theory and what emerges throughout the course of the analysis. The researcher's pre-conceptions of the consumption phenomenon inform the interpretation of the data rather than hinder it because:

“the frame of reference deriving from the researcher's theoretical and cultural knowledge provides a "provisional" perspective from which more informed understandings of a given phenomenon can be developed.” (Thompson et al. 1994, p.433)

Thus, the researcher's theoretical and intellectual background helps to enrich the interpretation of the phenomenon (Arnold and Fischer 1994; Thompson et al. 1994; Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Shankar et al. 2001). More specifically, the pre-understandings of the researcher (Shankar et al. 2001; Moisander and Valtonen 2006) can be considered to be an orientation through which the texts are interpreted. These pre-understandings are grounded in the researcher's knowledge of the topic, her/his reflections on consumption experiences and her/his socio-cultural background (Shankar et al. 2001; Moisander and Valtonen 2006). The review of extant literature contributions informs the process of data analysis as it provides understanding of informants' sustainable consumption experiences and the actual conceptualisations on competence from prior investigations.

5.4.2 Data Analysis: Coding

Following Spiggle (1994), “inferential processes in research require some combination of analysis and interpretation to create representations of data” (Spiggle 1994, p.492). The corpus of data analysed comprised the transcripts of the interviews and the field notes of the participant observations. As explained in the subsection 5.3.4, participating in Transition Bath events improved my understanding of the ways the informants practically lived out their engagement with the sustainability agenda. Participant observation helped to corroborate as well as enrich the understanding of what emerged from the interviews. More specifically, combining the individual perspective of the interviewee with the collective one as recorded in the field notes, allowed for a robust identification of the main themes through the data coding. However, the

field notes regarding the observations were not as productive as the interviews in that they did not uncover the conflicts and difficulties reported by individuals in the latter setting. This is because the activities that I observed were geared towards information sharing and practical skills development, which did not expose the nuances regarding sustainability that one to one dialogue was able to achieve.

The process of analysis started with an overall reading of the data. Categorisation was carried out inductively by identifying emergent categories (Spiggle 1994). The idiographic (individual) understanding of each interview entailed intra textual analysis that involved connecting its single passages to its whole (Thompson et al. 1990) As suggested by Spiggle (1994, p.493), passages in the transcripts can illustrate different topics of interest and, consequently, they were assigned multiple labels in order to group them by category. In fact, the analysis of the interviewees' experiences in specific domains of sustainability has entailed the identification of various categories as the interviewees were found to have mobilised different types of knowledge and skills to carry out the particular consumption practice described. Refinement of the definition of the emergent categories occurred throughout the process of analysis when my focus moved to addressing each transcript in turn, for the nuances and specificities of each interviewee's experience allowed for the improvement and enrichment of the definition of the categories. Moreover, the field notes from the participant observations were subject to the same procedure and this helped consolidate the identification of some of the key themes.

Subsequently, I proceeded with abstraction which entails combining "more empirically grounded categories into higher-order conceptual constructs" (Spiggle 1994, p.493). For example, many interviewees explained their gardening practices that took place in their personal allotments/gardens, community gardens or guerrilla gardening patches. My initial categorisation produced several sets of skills enunciated by the interviewees in describing their engagement in gardening: ability in composting, capacity for using the tools to grow (i.e. spade), ability to seed, knowledge of the seasonality of vegetables and fruits, intuition in understanding when fruits and vegetables are ripe, the ability to prune, and the capacity to identify weeds and remove them. Subsequently, these empirically grounded categories were combined under the conceptual class entitled craftsmanship in growing. After completing the analysis of the single interviews, I conducted an intertextual analysis of them to identify the similarities and differences between the experiences described by the different informants.

This process of categorisation and abstraction was applied to the corpus of data (transcripts of the interviews and field notes of participant observations). Subsequent, immersion into a process of continuous back and forth analysis of the data resulted in the identification of the key

themes (Spiggle 1994; Thompson et al. 1989, 1990; Connolly and Prothero 2008). During this process of theme recognition the extant theories were borne in mind so as to be able to make sense of the patterns of data that emerged. The themes and their interpretation will be discussed in the findings chapters 6 and 7.

5.5 Criteria of Validity

The criteria to judge the validity of qualitative research differ from those utilised to evaluate that of a quantitative study. A positivist perspective does not fit with the adoption of an interpretive stance, because it clashes with the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions. That is, the criteria of internal and external validity attributed to the positivist paradigm are based upon the existence of one reality to be represented and generalised. They are, hence, not aligned with interpretive beliefs of the existence of multiple realities and the influence played by the socio-cultural context on the phenomenon studied (Wallendorf and Belk 1989; Golafshani 2003). Similarly, the notions of reliability and objectivity contrast with the interpretive assumption of the researcher as the tool of investigation, who necessarily interacts in the field and looks for understanding in the meanings attributed to the phenomenon by the informants (Wallendorf and Belk 1989; Golafshani 2003). Even though positivists and interpretivists differ in their ways of evaluating the quality of a research project, they both share the same assumptions that:

“research conclusions should be empirically based; research should strive to be free of personal biases, prejudices, and dogma; other individuals should be able to agree that conclusions are justified by the data; and criteria should be provided for evaluating competing knowledge claims.” (Thompson et al. 1989, p.142)

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability) to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative research. These principles parallel the four positivist ones, previously presented (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Wallendorf and Belk 1989; Shankar and Patterson 2001). Moreover, Wallendorf and Belk (1989) introduced integrity as a fifth criterion so as to provide a more comprehensive assessment of trustworthiness.

Credibility

Credibility is the degree of “truth” of the findings (Lincoln and Guba 1985), that is, the researcher’s capacity to grasp the plurality of realities and not the extent to which she/he depicts one true reality. It responds to the questions: “How do we know whether to have confidence in the findings?” (Wallendorf and Belk 1989, p.70), “Do our interpretations agree with the subject’s?” (Shankar and Patterson 2001, p.485). In essence, this criterion examines the extent

to which the findings regarding the consumption phenomena analysed are believable (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). Prolonged engagement in the field is one of the techniques adopted to assure a degree of credibility of this study (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wallendorf and Belk 1989). As explained in the data collection section 5.3, I spent time to acculturate myself with the meanings and nuances characterising the ways sustainability is conceived and lived by the informants. Participating in different events (i.e. talks, meetings, and workshops) enabled me to investigate the complexity of implementing sustainability. Moreover, in line with the remarks by Wallendorf and Belk (1989), this extended involvement in the field favoured the development of relationships of trust with the informants. Engaging in the field must be not only continued, but also persistent (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). In essence, as contended by Lincoln and Guba (1985):

“If the purpose of prolonged engagement is to render the inquirer open to the multiple influences - the mutual shapers and contextual factors - that impinge upon the phenomenon being studied, the purpose of persistent observation is to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail. If prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth.” (p.304)

My interaction with the informants occurred in different occasions that revolved around various aspects of sustainability (i.e. production and consumption of local food, reduction of energy use). I interacted with them during the one to one phenomenological interviews, during the events organised by Transition Bath and in through informal discussions. Furthermore, credibility has been strengthened owing to the adoption of multiple methods, phenomenological interviews and participant observations. That is, the choices to adopt these techniques led to a deeper understanding of the difficulties encountered when attempting to carry out sustainability in terms of the competences involved, their mobilisation and the obstacles to doing so.

Transferability

Transferability is the second criterion utilised to judge the quality of the study, which arises in response to the questions: “Can we generalise our interpretation?” (Shankar and Patterson 2001, p. 485) and “How do we know the degree to which the findings apply in other contexts?” (Wallendorf and Belk 1989, p.70). In general, it refers to the extent to which the insights gained by the study can be applied in other contexts of analysis (Wallendorf and Belk 1989; Moisander and Valtonen 2006). Transferability is also one of the crucial characteristics of the concept of competence, the focus of this study. As explained in section 3.2, competence is mobilised and applied in different experiences by individuals (White 1959; De Young 2000; Le Boterf 2008a,

2008b). That is, even though competence has an ends driven nature and is directed towards the satisfaction of a particular goal, it can be applied in different contexts (Allal 2002; Dolz and Ollagnier 2002; Perrenoud 2002). Inquiring of the respondents about their performance of sustainability in their lives has not been restricted to a specific product industry or consumption experience. The phenomenological type of interviewing chosen entails the interviewees describing their own experiences about the phenomenon investigated. Being sustainability an overarching goal pursued by them in conducting their daily existence, they were free to explain their implementation of sustainability principles in their lives regarding their particular practices. Consequently, they were able to discuss the nature of the competencies mobilised to lead sustainable consumption by referring to various contexts in which they apply knowledge and skills to pursue their sustainability ideals. In sum, the type of the interviewing allowed for the respondents to cover a range of contexts and hence, provides some degree of transferability of the findings to other settings.

Dependability

This criterion concerns the minimisation of the bias potentially originating from the involvement of the researcher and it pertains to the questions: “How do we know the findings would be repeated if the study could be replicated in essentially the same way?” (Wallendorf and Belk 1989, p.70); “Given that the measurement instrument is a researcher, are interpretations consistent?” (Shankar and Patterson 2001, p.485). Thompson et al. (1989) suggested creating a research group to discuss the interpretation of the results, because this would lead to a consensus acceptable by all those involved. However, it was not possible to create a research group for this study, but presenting the results of this work at several conferences and conducting research seminars allowed for checking the interpretation and analysis of the findings with other colleagues. These interactions occurred both with researchers specialising in sustainability as well as with scholars with different but not unrelated research interests. In sum, these activities have not only provided evidence for the robustness of the interpretation of the results, but have also encouraged ongoing reflection by myself so as to get closer to the heart of the matter.

Confirmability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed confirmability as the fourth criterion to judge the trustworthiness of a qualitative research study. This refers to the extent to which the findings reflect the perceptions and experiences of the informants and are not biased by the preconceptions and interests of the inquirer. It is associated with the questions: “Are the data grounded interpretations free of bias?” (Shankar and Patterson 2001, p.485); “How do we know

the degree to which the findings emerge from the context and the respondents and not solely from the researcher?” (Wallendorf and Belk 1989, p.70).

Under interpretivism, the researcher is the “human research instrument” tasked with conducting the fieldwork and hence, she/he must reflect on her/his input, influence and presence throughout this endeavour (Wallendorf and Belk 1989; Rinallo 2011, 2013). In essence, confirmability requires maintaining an appropriate distance from the informants so as to not become a subject of the research, thereby contaminating the investigatory process and the outcomes. As explained in section 5.3, the position that I took as a researcher allowed me to gradually establish a relation of trust with the informants, but throughout the conduct of the project, I constantly reflected on my position as a researcher (Rinallo 2011, 2013). At the beginning of the study, my abstract and practical understanding of sustainability was quite limited and, hence, I immersed myself in grasping the ways the informants perceived and lived sustainability. As I became increasingly knowledgeable about the sustainability discourse and the informants’ life goals, I had to apply considerable effort to keep an appropriate distance and detachment so as to be able to analyse the data in a dispassionate and rigorous manner (Rinallo 2011, 2013).

Integrity

Wallendorf and Belk (1989) added the principle of integrity to assess the trustworthiness of a research endeavour, posing: “How do we know whether the findings are based on false information from the informants?” (Wallendorf and Belk 1989, p.70). In essence, they highlighted the importance to check upon the trustworthiness of what is shared by the informants. The problem of the reliability of the informants’ words has been already discussed in the subsection 5.3.3 on coping with social desirability bias. Recall, behaving in an environmentally and socially responsible way is the expected behaviour by a good citizen consumer and hence the informants could have told me what they thought I wanted to hear, which would make them appear as being such good citizens (Randal and Fernandes 1991; Chung and Monroe 2003; Auger and Devinney 2007; Carrington et al. 2010). Hence, in line with the suggestions by Wallendorf and Belk (1989), I worked to build trusting relationships with informants over time, which would increase the likelihood of their having frank discussion with me about the complexity of leading a sustainable consumption lifestyle. Moreover, a relaxed atmosphere was encouraged by me during all of the interviews. As explained in subsection 5.3.2, the interview started with a broad question on what sustainability represented for them; then, the emerging discourse by the informants led the dialogue. They openly shared their difficulties to materialise their ideals, revealed sensitive details of their lives and gave me personal insights into the challenges faced whilst pursuing their sustainable dream.

Consequently, I am of the opinion that they disclosed honest information about the focal issues of interest in my research endeavour.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented the methodological choices underlying this study.

The goals of this research project are best pursued by adopting an interpretive philosophical stance because this facilitates the deep understanding of the experiences lived by consumers when seeking to mobilise competences to realise their sustainability ideals.

Phenomenological interviews and participant observations have allowed me to grasp the nuanced and complex experiences lived by the informants pursuing their own interpretation of sustainability. The themes emerging from the process of data analysis and interpretation are discussed in the following chapters 6 and 7.

Chapter 6 reveals the multifaceted nature of consumer competence, whereas chapter 7 highlights the role played by its different dimensions when attempting to live sustainably.

6 CONSUMING SUSTAINABLY: A MULTIFACETED COMPETENCE

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores and interprets the complex nature of the consumer competence underpinning the implementation of sustainability. In line with the motivational nature of competence (White 1959; Harter 1978; Allal 2002; Le Boterf 2011), section 6.2 discusses what sustainability means for the informants. Achieving sustainability represents a goal for which consumers display a combination of different knowledge and skills, whilst interpreting what this means for them casts light on the ways they mobilise competence to attain sustainability.

Judging the marketplace represents the first area of competence utilised to behave sustainably (section 6.3). Different but complementary facets of consumer knowledge support the conduct of consumption practices aimed at ‘voting’ for sustainability (Shaw and Newholm 2002; Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Shaw and Black 2009). The findings confirm previous contributions that have uncovered the importance for consumers of familiarising themselves with the numerous product labels that reflect corporate engagement with sustainability (Prothero et al. 1997; Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Peattie and Crane 2005; Connolly and Prothero 2008; McEachern and Warnaby 2008b). Moreover, the results contribute to enhancing the debate on consumers’ proximity to production (Selfa and Qazi 2005; Seyfang 2005; Ilbery and Maye 2007). In essence, being aware of the processes of creation and distribution of products represents a crucial skill when endeavouring to buy sustainably. Moreover, identifying the multifaceted customer knowledge mobilised to judge the marketplace sheds light on the performance of sustainability within maintained levels of consumption (Shaw and Newholm 2002; Fucks and Lorek 2005; Cherrier et al. 2012).

Section 6.4 reveals consumer competence as a capacity to shape the marketplace. As discussed in section 3.5, prosumeristic skills support consumers to be active agents in the market arena not only by judging corporate conduct, but also by becoming producers themselves. Discussing craftsmanship skills to lead a sustainable lifestyle contributes to extending the definition of competence beyond the focus upon the knowledge to purchase. Thus, being competent to achieve sustainability goals also means having the skills to attain a degree of self-reliance and reduce consumption (Evans and Abrahamse 2009; Evans 2011). The intrinsic pleasure obtained by being competent (White 1959) in forging consumption contributes to conceiving sustainability as a pleasurable path, and not necessarily one couched in terms of deprivation. Consequently, these findings develop further the ongoing debate on hedonism pertaining to the engagement with sustainability (Soper 2007; Autio et al. 2009).

Finally, the capacity to manage resources effectively represents the third dimension of competence activated to lead a sustainable lifestyle. In particular, the ability to handle different types of resources in combination (i.e. time, money, and human networks) is crucial to performing sustainable consumption. Conforming to multidisciplinary contributions (Dolz and Ollagnier 2002; Perrenoud 2002; Le Boterf 2011), it emerges that competence represents an overarching concept in respect to the one of resource as found in the HR and education fields (see section 3.2). Consequently, this study provides further clarification regarding the distinction between these two concepts (Holt 1998; Allen 2002; Arnould et al. 2006a; Arnould 2008).

In general, pursuing sustainability goals occurs through mobilising these three dimensions of consumer competence, which interact together to result in sustainable consumption practices. That is, through this research, it is held consumer competence should be conceived according to a combinatorial logic rather than an assembling one, because it does not simply involve a single aspect, such as being an expert in purchasing sustainably. This finding provides support for the position taken in HR management and education traditions regarding the systemic nature of competence, as explained in section 3.2 (Dolz and Ollagnier 2002; Perrenoud 2002; Le Boterf 2011).

6.2 Directing Competence towards Sustainability Goals

Competence is driven by specific objectives (Le Boterf 1994; Durand 2006) and consequently, it is important to understand the sense consumers attach to sustainability as their goal. The first step to interpreting the competence underlying sustainable consumption is to discuss the meanings attributed to it by the informants. A multiplicity of reasons to engage in sustainability emerged from the analysis of the interviews which was consistent with the variety of meanings attached to sustainability in the literature (De Young 2000). For example, according to Veronica, sustainability is omnipresent in her life as it automatically features in almost everything she does:

“To be honest I don’t think about it [sustainability] that often. It just seems to me to be automatic, so I don’t reflect on living sustainably except when I am asked by somebody like you.” (she laughs) (Veronica)

Like Veronica, all the informants express parity between their sayings and doings regarding sustainability. Adele and William, for example, highlight the ubiquity of sustainability in their lives by stressing that it is naturally ingrained in the performance of their daily practices.

“It [sustainability] is really a way of life. I mean everything I do, you know, as long as I can afford it, I do everything in a sustainable way. I don't buy things unless I need to, I don't have a lot of stuff. I use my car the minimum amount as I always go by train.”
(Adele)

“Most of the nouns and adjectives of sustainability are related to energy: minimising energy use, minimising carbon emissions. And probably there is a broader set but it is a sort of low priorities. So, it [sustainability] entails reducing consumption; just generally having a sort of lower footprint.” (William)

Adele's and William's explanations of their commitment to sustainability reveal their motivation to minimise their effects on the environment. In line with the majority of literature contributions, the informants pursue sustainability to contribute to preserving and protecting environmental resources (De Young 2000). The emphasis attributed to cutting back consumption confirms how sustainability is interpreted as a path where “less is more” (Todd and Lawson 2003; McDonald et al. 2006). For example, Adele and William are downshifters (Etzioni 1998) as they engage in different practices that are aimed at guaranteeing a lower use of resources by restricting their consumption.

Consuming sustainably is also driven by the promise of self-enhancement and the words of Stephen highlight the self-interest that he derives from engaging in sustainable practices:

“I think that things related to sustainability are about: How much water are you using? From where your food is coming from? How are you travelling? That kind of aspect... all the different kind of neat small things ... But, I was thinking, that there is also a spiritual sustainability for me. The idea of giving myself spiritually in order for me to keep going. I guess, in that respect, sustainability for me is about longevity, about what you are doing in life. So, to make everything around you go on for longer.” (Stephen)

Stephen performs sustainable practices not only to respect the environment, but also as a way to nurture spiritual growth. Interestingly, his connection of sustainability with spirituality provides evidence for the complementarity of extrinsic and personal motivations to engage in practising it. Performing sustainable practices has been described as a way to dedicate time to the development of the self (Soper 2007; Trentmann 2007), thereby enriching consumer's own existence (Moisander and Pesonen 2002; Arnould 2003; Soper 2007; Soron 2010; McDonagh et al. 2012). Stephen interprets his engagement in sustainability as a spiritual path leading towards his personal enhancement and the longevity of the context around him. In other words, pursuing

sustainability represents a way to feed self-interest and to engage in the reciprocity of inter and intra generational transfer regarding this concept (Gladwin et al. 1995; Collard 2001).

The cyclical and self-supporting nature of leading a sustainable lifestyle is captured by Margaret:

“Sustainability to me it means ... I don't know what is the dictionary definition for it ... To me must be self-supporting. It must be able to replicate itself without further input. So, this is what sustainability means to me.” (Margaret)

Regarding this, section 6.4 sheds light on the skills mobilised by these consumers to achieve self-reliant goals and, hence, strengthening community bonds (Lastovicka et al. 1999; Todd and Lawson 2003; Witkowski 2003; Pepper et al. 2009).

Thus, it would appear that the motivations that push the informants to engage in a sustainable consumption lifestyle are consistent with those identified in the literature. In essence, individuals are motivated to be part of the sustainability agenda owing the positive impact it has on the environment, their community and the self-enhancement that they derive from engaging in it. Consequently, the findings support the perspective that the reasons why people choose to engage in sustainability go beyond the willingness to contribute to preserve environmental resources (De Young 2000; Valor 2008). The next sections discuss the webs of competencies displayed by consumers to satisfy their urge to achieve sustainability.

6.3 Consumer Competence: Judging the Marketplace

This section presents consumer competence as an asset adopted by consumers to purchase in an environmentally and socially friendly way, with a web of different types of competences characterising this dimension. It extends the definition of product expertise, developed by Alba and Hutchinson (1987). According to this latter perspective, judging the marketplace is framed in terms of the psychological dynamics and cognitive structures selected to make consumption decisions. For, it is contended that acquiring such expertise goes beyond being knowledgeable regarding products and services. In effect, being able to judge the marketplace also includes being an expert in the production and distribution processes as well as being cognisant of their relative environmental and societal effects. Differently from the concepts of product expertise (Alba and Hutchinson 1987) and consumer sophistication (Sproles et al. 1978; Titus and Bradford 1996), consumer competence is not intended to be a tool for efficient decision making. For, in the context of the current research it has been found that, whilst aiming to pursue a sustainable agenda, consumers mobilise different types of knowledge to ‘vote’ for sustainable marketplace offers.

The following subsections reveal the multifaceted nature of the consumer knowledge required to judge the marketplace in order to satisfy sustainability objectives. Regarding which, being aware of the functioning of production/distribution/disposal processes is discussed. In addition, knowing the story behind the eco-friendly brands enables consumers to reward corporate engagement in sustainability causes. Moreover, knowledge of products origins and characteristics guide informants to choose the most environmentally-friendly options. Finally, recognising and reading labels facilitates the identification for consumers of sustainable offers.

6.3.1 Understanding Production/Distribution/Disposal Processes

Being aware of the processes of transformation of products allows informants to take a critical stance towards them and, in particular to evaluate the effects that they exert on the environment in terms of their carbon footprint or societal impact. The findings of this section confirm a level of consumer deskilling (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Moraes et al. 2010, 2012). In essence, the informants perceive a widespread detachment from goods and their methods of production among the public audience. Owen and Brigitte disclose the relevance that they attribute to knowing the processes through which products go through. By so doing, they set an imaginary boundary between themselves believing they are competent and reflective regarding product life cycles and people who are disconnected from production and its processes.

“You grow it [the food], you cook it and you eat it, whereas many people are many ripples away from the place where it is grown. So it gets harvested. It goes into some big corporations and, then, in these big corporations it turns into some kind of processed food. Processed food goes to the supermarket. Or it may go into another processor that turns it into a ready meal and, then, it goes to the supermarket and, then, it comes out again. So, it has been into many processes.” (Owen)

“I think that society is out there because people have lost control on their lives. They buy their cars; they buy their methods of transport; they buy education, health. They buy everything that just keeps you away from reality, you know. It is just ... You lose contact, you lose control of things and I think that this drives people crazy. It is a bit returning to a bit of sanity, and a bit of understanding the simple things. It could be clothes, it could be making food. It is the same process. And you know, I see, it is more men than women. Think about all these British blogs on how to mend cars.” (Brigitte)

Interestingly, both Owen and Brigitte register a general detachment from where materials are sourced, as well as a degree of unawareness of the practices of product transformation. In line

with the stream of research on consumer deskillling, the reflections of both, as contained in the above passages, denounce the effects that consumer deskillling provokes. Specifically, Brigitte's observation of an inclination to reacquire manual skills supports consumer reskillling as a path to reconnect consumers with production. Such consumer reskillling enables the acquisition of a greater understanding of the extraction of materials, production, transformation and shipping (Selfa and Qazi 2005; Seyfang 2005; Ilbery and Maye 2007).

Being aware of the environmental effects provoked along with the creation of products leads also to abstention from consumption rather than choosing between different commercial offers. As revealed by Kate:

"If you consider the jumper that I have on, it [the major environmental effect] would be through the process of being made, other than a tiny amount of emissions when you are going to wash things. So, the less you buy, the less you are encouraging things to be made which is when they make an impact." (Kate)

This is in line with Dobscha et al. (2012), who point out that being knowledgeable in terms of production and distribution processes, supports abstention from consumption. Alternatively, being reflective upon the processes of products' disposition can lead to modification of daily consumption practices:

"If you buy a five litre jar of washing liquid, then you are not wasting five little bottles." (Margaret)

Choosing to buy big containers rather than small packages reduces the level of purchasing as it is undertaken only once and not several times (Black and Cherrier 2010; Cherrier et al. 2012; Dobscha et al. 2012).

Understanding product life cycles and being conscious of the origins of waste represents an area of expertise to implement sustainability principles. Transition Bath's talk "How can we create a zero waste city?" was aimed at sensitising the public audience towards the interconnections existing between production and disposal techniques and their environmental effects.

"Julie (Hill), then, shows on the screen an image of a graph representing upstream and downstream fluxes of waste. She explains to the audience the advantages that can be gained by the activation of circular dynamics rather than linear ones. She refers to the book "Cradle to cradle" to explain the advantages of a continuous circular flux where

products that have reached the final stage of their lives are re-integrated into the system to generate new ones. She stresses three main points: "What do we know? First, bio waste should go to land and not landfill. Second, non-bio waste should stay in circulation. So, remember, all wastes mean waste of energy, usually carbon-based, and water." (Field note taken while participating in a Transition Bath talk)

The presentation by Julie Hill of her book ("The Secret Life of Stuff: A Manual for a New Material World") confirmed the comprehension of product trajectories as being the ability to reflect upon their environmental and societal impacts. Events and books, like those of Julie Hill, are a source of competence for consumers. Section 6.5 deepens the discussion regarding the resources for developing knowledge and skills to conduct a sustainable lifestyle.

6.3.2 Knowing Product Origins and Characteristics

This subsection focuses upon competence as comprehension of a product industry. It differs from the next one, which discusses the degree of knowledge utilised to reward brands that better respond to consumer sustainability ideals.

Knowledge of products origins and their characteristics represents a complementary domain of expertise in comparison to that described in the previous section. In essence, understanding product lifecycles and the peculiarities of product categories allows for consumers to feel more connected with the products themselves (Brewis and Gavin 2005; McDonagh and Prothero 2005; Lamine 2008). Moreover, knowing how to differentiate among products and to be aware of their origins distinguishes the informants from the general public. Similar to the previous subsection, the findings here are consistent with the stream of literature on consumer deskilling (Sherry 1984; Lyon et al. 2003; Jaffe and Gertler 2006). The extract below from the interview with Damini and a field note taken during a food group meeting contribute to understanding this aspect of consumer knowledge within the mundane context of food consumption. Damini is an expert cook, and she attributes importance, time and effort to sharing her cooking skills with her family members. She denounces the general lack of cooking skills and ignorance of product sources.

"The next generation doesn't have any idea of how to do anything. They think, what is the joke? Ah yes, that in school some children think that milk comes from the supermarket not from a cow. Many such things, they have no idea of the vegetables grown in the ground; they come in a packet. Carrots are a packet of pre-packed, pre-cleaned chopped carrots and not that you can put a seed into the earth and it produces a carrot." (Damini)

Damini's provocative reflections help to move the focus from just the final purchasing act at the supermarket to considering the origins of the products and their overall process of production. The example of purchasing ready-to-eat carrots, in its simplicity, helps to broaden the boundaries of the notion of consumer sophistication (Sproles et al. 1978; Titus and Bradford 1996). That is, it would appear to depend on the ability of being an efficient decision-maker and in having self-confidence in the purchasing process. Being competent in "shopping for sustainability" requires not only being a smart shopper at retailing interfaces, but also knowing product sources and being cognisant about the environmental consequences of packaging that provoke an excess of waste.

During a food group meeting, Rose discussed the level of deskilling among the public audience in regards to food and proposed guerrilla gardening as being a space for enhancing consumer knowledge of vegetables and fruits.

"The turn to talk about the guerrilla gardening activities has come. And, as it often occurs, Rose takes the floor. Usually the discussion has revolved around competence to do guerrilla gardening in terms of gardening skills but, this time Rose proposes a new idea. She suggests putting sticks with labels, which indicate what has been planted. These will also be an indication of the seasonality of vegetables and fruits. She says: "People don't have a connection with nature. They don't know how to grow. Having certain labels can attract these people and educate them." (Field note taken while participating in a food group meeting)

The initiative proposed by Rose represents one of the ways to enhance the knowledge of products origins and characteristics. Besides referring to the degree of consumer disconnection with nature and with production (Sherry 1984; Lyon et al. 2003; Jaffe and Gertler 2006), she directs attention towards educating in sustainability. She proposes handmade labels to show what products have been planted and where. Labelling is, indeed, an area of expertise that has also been debated in the literature (Connolly and Prothero 2008; McEachern and Warnaby 2008a, 2008b). The next subsection addresses the type of knowledge necessary for identifying sustainable offers at shop counters.

6.3.3 Capacity to Recognise and Read Labels

Consumer knowledge regarding how to purchase sustainably is closely linked to their ability to interpret the labelling systems of companies claiming to be engaging in the sustainability discourse (Peattie and Crane 2005; McEachern and Warnaby 2008b). Consumers mobilise their knowledge of various labels to identify brands that subscribe to these assertions and employ this

in their decision as to whether to vote for them or not (McGregor 1999, 2002; Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Harrison et al. 2005; Shaw et al. 2006; Shaw and Black 2009). Those who buy into the sustainability agenda are reassured to know that they are supporting a producer adhering to its principles. As explained by Kate with regards to furnishing her spare bedroom:

“I just had my spare bedroom done, so I needed to buy a new bed. I spent some time asking people from where I can buy a bed for which I know the wood would be properly sourced. At the end, somebody said to me the name of a company. When you go to their website, they have every sustainable award imaginable along the bottom of their website page with a description and a little voice. At the end of every single page there is written: ‘We make it so that it will last longer than you’. This is the place I am buying from, it may cost me more money but this is a place where I want my money to go.”
(Kate)

Kate mobilises her knowledge of sustainable certifications and awards. In this instance, so as to act consistently with her sustainability beliefs, she shopped for a bed with materials sourced and processed sustainably. In this case, consumer knowledge of sustainable labelling systems can be seen to contribute to performing buycotting (Shaw and Newholm 2002; Shaw et al. 2006; Trentmann 2007). This finding confirms the literature that highlights how consumers reward corporations committed to the sustainability agenda by voting for them through their purchasing acts (McGregor 1999, 2002; Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Harrison et al. 2005; Seyfang 2005; Shaw et al. 2006; Soper 2007; Trentmann 2007; Shaw and Black 2009).

Labelling is important in terms of certifying the relative sustainability of an offer (Prothero et al. 1997) as demonstrated by the purchasing practice of James:

“Now there are a lot of labels to say how things have been farmed. So, for example, I always buy free range or woodland eggs and chicken. And there are various quality assurance marks or other types of food I always try to buy organic; when you don't buy organic the best thing is that it has a label on that it is farm assured.” (James).

Both Kate and James display consumer knowledge of sustainable labelling schemes when conducting their sustainable purchasing practices, which can reassure them that their shopping practices align with their sustainability credo.

There are various stakeholder competencies involved when faced with sustainable labelling schemes. For example, consumer competence lies in being aware of the variety of labels and in

being able to distinguish and recognise them. Moreover, the associations responsible for the labelling systems certifying that the products are sustainable have the competence to guarantee the environmental friendliness of the goods. Finally, the producers have to be competent in operationalising manufacturing processes according to the requirements imposed by the labelling schemes. Each actor involved displays a different kind of competence for the practice to take place and, consequently it is possible to talk about ‘chains of competence’.

6.3.4 Knowing the Story behind Sustainable Brands

Consumers choose brands that embody their sustainability ideals by evaluating their mission, supply chain and product characteristics. Veronica and Brigitte talked about a greengrocer and a brand of sports equipment as examples of sustainable brands. Veronica not only ‘voted’ for a retailer by acquiring its products but, literally, ‘voted’ for it by nominating it for receiving a sustainability award:

“Just this week, I filled in a nomination form and sent it to the council to nominate a particular shop for its contribution for sustainability. It is a greengrocer family farm which grows vegetables just outside Bath. He has done it for generations. They get the eggs from the edges of Bath, they get the milk from the same place, and they do a delivery service and stock a lot of organic products. This shop is totally sustainable, I think.” (Veronica)

Explaining her purchasing experiences, Brigitte described the eco and societal friendliness of her favourite brand of sports equipment:

“X does skis made in France. They are local and I have the feeling, from using the products, that the company does care about quality and makes equipment that lasts. The social impact is huge; it is all related to jobs, community and knowledge.” (Brigitte)

Veronica and Brigitte’s reflexive awareness of these brand stories reveals how they mobilised the different types of knowledge identified in the previous three subsections. They both voted for sustainability (Dickinson and Carsky 2005; Seyfang 2005; Shaw and Black 2009) by purchasing two sustainable brands, making their decisions based upon the awareness and evaluation of the conduct of these two corporations. Moreover, they displayed understanding of production and distribution processes by rewarding the short lengths of their supply chains. In so doing, they both demonstrated how they mobilised their knowledge of the product origins and characteristics. Veronica identified the local sources of provision for the greengrocer and

Brigitte highlight that production was kept authentic by the brand X, which represents a form of competence that responds to the focus on localisation and the respect of traditions, things that are typical in the sustainability agenda (Seyfang 2005, 2006). Moreover, Veronica was aware of the initiative to reward an organisation dedicated to the sustainability agenda and decided to vote for her greengrocer to win the award for this competition.

To conclude, this section has highlighted the multiple faceted nature of the consumer knowledge displayed by consumers to purchase in line with their sustainability principles. It has also shown the distinctive types of consumer competence employed to judge the marketplace when pursuing sustainability goals. Furthermore, the evidence has reinforced the notion of the complementarity between these different dimensions and the benefits of studying consumer competence according to a combinatorial logic rather than an additional one.

6.4 Consumer Competence: Shaping the Marketplace

Competence as the basis of the engagement in the conduct of sustainability is not only a competence of consumption but also one of production. This section contributes to extending the understanding of the complexity of the concept of consumer competence by unpacking its productive nature. Consumer competence to perform sustainability is, hence, prosumeristic (Toffler 1980; Carù and Cova 2011; Cova and Cova 2012) and consequently, the findings shed light on competence intended as prosumeristic skills. The first subsection (6.4.1) presents consumer competence in terms of craftsmanship skills for being both producers and consumers. The informants engage in sustainability by cooking, sewing, growing, gardening and DIY. The abilities displayed in performing these practices are in line with the literature on craftsmanship (de Certeau 1990; Campbell 2005; Fabris 2008) and productive consumption (Moisio et al. 2013) as manual skills support implementation of craftsmanship projects.

Moreover, the findings enhance understanding of the links between craftsmanship and frugality in that it emerges that such skills shape consumers' sustainability principles, whereby they commit to frugality (Lastovicka et al. 1999; Todd and Lawson 2003; Pepper et al. 2009; Evans 2011) and voluntary simplicity (Leonard-Barton 1981; Etzioni 1998; Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; McDonald et al. 2006). Possessing the ability to craft enables them to decrease their level of consumption. In fact, they become producers themselves and are capable of giving a second life to things by repairing instead of discarding them, thanks to their manual skills. Furthermore, the pleasure gained in crafting for sustainability confirms the hedonism obtained in engaging in productive consumption activities (Moisio et al. 2013). At the same time, mobilising craftsmanship skills is enabling the informants to live sustainability in a pleasurable way. Consequently, these results align with the few pieces of research proposing the interpretation of

sustainability as being a hedonic experience (Soper 2007; Autio et al. 2009; McDonagh et al. 2012).

Subsection 6.4.2 discusses how prosumeristic skills are mobilised by consumers to criticise the offer side and to create alternatives to the commercial offers. The findings differ from the majority of publications that investigate these skills as displayed by consumers to cooperate with producers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Bonsu and Darmody 2008). By contrast, in this study I investigate prosumerism in its mundane manifestation. That is, this work shows how daily craftsmanship skills are adopted by consumers to criticise the offer side and create an alternative that they consider more sustainable. The interpretation of the artisan competence mobilised to perform sustainable consumption and, at the same time, to criticise the offer side extends extant comprehension of sustainability as a reduced form of consumption (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Shaw and Newholm 2002; Cherrier et al. 2012).

Finally, subsection 6.4.3 shows how consumer artisanship skills represent a lens to look at social sustainability enhancement. Usually, productive consumption abilities have been considered in consumer research literature as a potential rich source of competence for companies (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000, 2004; Arnould et al. 2006a; Bonsu and Darmody 2008; Zwick et al. 2008). This subsection investigates the manual art to perform sustainability so as to shed light on the relationship between individuals and public institutions. Thus, these three sections highlight consumer competence in terms of practical skills used to shape the marketplace in terms of auto-production, criticism of the offer side and support of public initiatives.

6.4.1 Crafting Sustainability: An Art of Doing

Sustainable consumption is also performed through the mobilisation of a manual art and crafting to achieve sustainability objectives occurs by mastering a set of different skills that vary according to the particular practice. Crafting is acknowledged as an expression of the ideals of sustainability, whereby the informants feel that they are craftsmen of the environment (Sennett 2008) by being producers of their own consumption. The development of craftsmanship skills makes them as consumers feel more self-reliant, as expressed by Damini:

“DIY [Do it yourself] is definitely a life skill so that people can do things for themselves, and believe that they can do things for themselves, rather than always having somebody outside to do things.” (Damini)

Artisanship at the basis of DIY projects reveals the informants' attempts to attain a degree of self-reliance in line with their sustainability objectives (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Bowers 2002; Pavlova 2005). These consumers, hence, gain a sense of independence from the commoditised marketplace proposals, in line with the perspectives by Campbell (2005), Watson and Shove (2008) and Moisio et al. (2013). This sense of self-reliance is reflected also in the informants' willingness to extend the lives of products without necessarily recurring to the marketplace to acquire a new model. For example, Owen expressed his adoption of artisan skills by referring to his innate instinct to repair objects that are broken:

“If something breaks, I will want to hold on to it and try to repair it. My father was always somebody who was able to repair things and he did repair things and he didn't believe in building obsolescence, things that you throw away instead of using them. He would want to repair something. My mother was always frugal. So, I observed and absorbed how they behave and, then, I have their genes.” (Owen)

Craftsmanship skills, hence, embody frugality and voluntary simplicity (Lastovicka et al. 1999; Shaw and Newholm 2002; Arnould 2003; Todd and Lawson 2003; Evans 2011).

Owen's mobilisation of craftsmanship skills allows him to materialise a frugal way of life thanks to his engagement in domestic forms of production (Arnould 2003; Todd and Lawson 2003; Witkowski 2003; Pepper et al. 2009; Evans 2011). He employs these skills, which have been passed down by family members, to pursue his anti-waste sustainability goals. Judith, Veronica and William follow the same trajectory as Owen, whereby they are reinterpreting the frugality skills that their parents and other family utilised in the past so as to minimise their environmental impact. These findings confirm the link between frugality and sustainability in that they highlight how craftsmanship skills of auto-production support consumers' alternative sustainable forms of consumption (Witkowski 2003; Evans 2011). Furthermore, they reveal the importance of the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and skills (McGregor et al. 2000; Collard 2000, 2001; Markandya and Mason 2000, Shove and Walker 2010). This aspect will be investigated further in section 7.2.

Crafting for sustainability encompasses different consumption experiences, such as DIY projects, cooking, gardening, growing and sewing. Attending the outdoor cookery course was an occasion for observing the practice of cooking to attain sustainability. As mentioned earlier, the course took place in the demonstration garden of the Bath Organic Group and the aim was to promote seasonal varieties of fruits and vegetables that are grown there.

“Another participant and I are helping the expert to prepare the pizzas in the earth

oven. Everyone has a task. The other participant rolls the pizza dough; I sprinkle with oil and the raw cut vegetables, and the expert bakes the pizzas in the oven. Some metres from us, Rose develops her competence in managing the rocket stove with other two participants. I turn, and two other participants have just come back from a little excursion in the allotment. They have a basket with some fresh salad leaves and flowers to make a salad. And one says: "Organic, straight from the garden to our table!"."
(Field note taken during the attendance of the outdoor cookery course)

The course was an occasion for the participants not only to improve their cooking skills, but also to enhance their awareness of the relationship between cooking and sustainability. In fact, the expert not only showed how to prepare recipes, but also decided to lead the workshop directly in the context of a botanic garden, which allowed for her to highlight the links between different craftsmanship skills and sustainability (cooking, growing, and gardening). The importance attributed to the knowledge of the raw ingredients to use to cook was an illustration of the breadth that Campbell (2005) and Watson and Shove (2008) have attributed to the meaning of craftsmanship, which they have contended goes beyond the technical skills specific for the conduct of a particular practice. For, it also includes the process of designing the practice, the intuition to adjust the performance of the practice, and the knowledge and skill to select the raw materials needed (Campbell 2005). All these components emerged in the practice of outdoor cooking and also form the basis for that of gardening, as explained by Irene.

"I am probably still classified as a beginner but I have been working on the garden since I arrived two years ago. I have been reading books about gardening, and I ask people questions. I know the basics of planting, pruning and mulching, I know when a plant is doing OK and when it is not OK. And anything I don't know I look it up or ask somebody. And when I was travelling, I worked in some organic and permaculture places, I learnt things there about growing." (Irene)

Irene's performance of the practice of gardening confirms the complex architecture of craftsmanship, as constituted by: technical skills (i.e. how to prune), knowledge (i.e. awareness of the different plant species), and intuition (i.e. instinct to know the health condition of the plant).

Competence expressed in terms of craftsmanship helps also to shed light on the link between prosumeristic skills and hedonism. The findings of this study conform with the perspective in the literature that craftsmanship skills are means of self-expression and pleasure (Campbell 2005; Fabris 2008; Moisio et al. 2013).

For example, Rose is highly committed to gardening, because of the meaning that it brings to her life:

“I am a mad gardener; I can't stop. I always ... I mean ... I like growing plants and vegetables.” (Rose)

Consequently, hedonism can be seen as being inextricably associated with crafting for sustainability in that these informants derive pleasurable benefits from their activities towards this goal (Soper 2007, 2008, 2013; Autio et al. 2009; McDonagh et al. 2012). The next subsection discusses prosumeristic skills mobilised as a means to evaluate and criticise corporate offers.

6.4.2 Craftsmanship to ‘Compete’ with the Offer Side

As seen in the previous subsection, acquiring artisanship enables consumers to design and perform productive consumption (Campbell 2005; Fabris 2008; Moisio et al. 2013). This subsection extends the understanding of consumer competence, inherent in craftsmanship skills, beyond the domain of prosumeristic home consumption or collaboration with the offer side. Thus, a different angle for considering the notion of craftsmanship is proposed. That is, mobilising competence in the form of prosumeristic skills gives consumers the confidence to question similar practice performed on mass production scale. The narrative on Damini’s production of yogurt illustrates this point.

“I make my own yogurt. I save a lot of money, I don't buy pots of yogurt. I grew up with that in India; you make your own yogurt. You don't buy it. That's fantastic, not even a trade-off of time and money; we don't have to put too much time in it. It is a skill; it is a little bit of knowledge on how to make your own yogurt. I grew up in that environment where everybody does it. I will show you. You just take a bit of the old yogurt, put some old milk into it, and put it in a warm place and you get your own yogurt. You don't have to buy the pots from the shops. It's a lot cheaper to buy the milk and make your own yogurt. It is real life yogurt. It is not pretending like. They say bio-culture; it is rubbish, it is not. Well it is, but it is not the same as this because if you use those life cultures to make new yogurt it doesn't work. You have to get real live yogurt from the Asian supermarket or something like this. It is an example of the fact that sustainability is always there in our life now. We don't think: “Oh we are going to be sustainable; oh we need to do this; do this because we have to live sustainably.” It is just part of our lifestyle.” (Damini)

Being competent in yogurt production is cherished as a source of satisfaction, because of its home-made quality. Damini also engages its production as she believes in its environmental and health-related benefits. Furthermore, the ability to create her own yogurt independently makes her question the reliability of the same goods offered in the supermarkets. In addition, her craftsmanship as the producer of her own consumption reveals an inclination to position herself against commodification. Thus, craftsmanship in this case is an expression of consumer's refusal to accept standardisation and is in line with the findings of Campbell (2005). Her prosumeristic skills are, hence, interpretable as a demonstration of her consumer savvy in being able to judge the quality of the products offered in retailing contexts. Her combination of two dimensions of competence, namely "judging the marketplace" and "shaping the marketplace", hence, demonstrates the complementarity between the different aspects of consumer competence.

Extending craftsmanship beyond frugality and voluntary simplicity down the line of consumer savvy is demonstrated by Tessa's sewing practices. Her engagement in sewing is not only viewed in frugal terms as a way of producing her own clothes but, in line with Damini's experience, these skills help her to challenge the marketplace.

"I brought this coat today because I remade it. I bought it in a charity shop for four pounds and it was just a huge big coat up to here. [She tries the coat on and explains the story of the garment by showing me details of it]. I just cut it into a different shape, and I worked to make it fit me. So, that is a new coat for four pounds. I also made this handbag. I saw one that was by X and it was [on sale for] about two thousand pounds. It was not exactly like this purse, but it was a similar idea with the pieces of leather. And it just happened that I had a piece of leather that I bought on e-bay, just because it was cheap. And I thought: "Oh, I can do that, and I just did it" [she smiles and laughs satisfied]. And it has lasted very well, for about six years now, and it is still strong."
(Tessa)

Tessa mobilises her sewing skills to combine her passion for fashion with her commitment to the sustainability cause. She pursues her sustainability ideals through employing her crafting skills, whereby she gives a new life to discarded garments. Furthermore, she is knowledgeable about the quality of the materials from which clothes and accessories are made, such that she is aware of which will last a long time and hence, should not to be thrown away. By acting in this way, she is utilising her prosumeristic skills so as to create her own alternative to marketplace offers. Moreover, she derives pleasure and satisfaction by being able to realise an object that is

unique, whilst at the same time satisfactorily competing with the corporate standardised expensive bag.

Tessa's productive consumption project to hand-craft a bag, inspired by a corporate model, extends the comparison of consumer competence and corporate competence to more mundane contexts. However, the majority of consumer research contributions on consumer craftsmanship to recreate and develop further a commercial offer have been analysed in the context of high technology (Meuter et al. 2005; Fuller 2006; Bonsu and Darmody 2008; Zwick et al. 2008). Moreover, these studies have interpreted consumer competence as an 'operant resource' for marketers to enhance their corporate proposal (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000, 2004; Vargo and Lusch 2004; Arnould et al. 2006a; Lusch et al. 2008).

6.4.3 Craftsmanship as a Means to Reskill

This subsection considers the role played by prosumeristic skills in the context of reskilling, where it is found that enhancing handcraft abilities enables the development of initiatives favouring both environmental and social sustainability objectives. These results contribute to the debate on consumer reskilling (Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Lamine 2008).

When describing the practice of reskilling, Damini and Veronica referred to activities occurring in India and the United Kingdom. In both cases narratives about programmes aimed at equipping individuals with craftsmanship skills so as to cope with unemployment in two different areas of the world were shared. In Rajasthan, India, reskilling has allowed for the creation of unique pieces of clothes and decorative objects as opposed to the mass-produced ones. Reskilling increases competence which enables the creation of unique things as well as providing improvements in the quality of life:

"In Rajasthan, a friend of mine works in some villages and teaches them [the villagers] sewing skills and fabric dyeing and printing and stuff like this. She makes amazing things. She uses plastic water bottles to make chandeliers; she uses cements bags to make lamp shades. She uses just old shirts and old cardigans and old thick material to make laptop cases. So, the old shirt is the lining of the case. The old cardigan if it has a hole, here and here; they open it and they use it. So, they take out the wool from the cardigan, and they are using that wool to make patterns. So a cardigan that is old, what do you do with it? I suppose that it goes to recycling into fabrics. But that is labour intensive. That's why the women in the villages have got time to do this, so they can do this, but that is a beautiful object, an artistic object that has been created, a unique piece." (Damini)

Reskilling entails respect for the traditions and the context of where it takes place and despite geographies and cultures, it is a globalised issue with similar trajectories and goals. In the United Kingdom (Bath), a reskilling scheme has been suggested to develop hand craft abilities to repair and recycle.

“In such times of unemployment there should be support for organizations that re-skill people in how to repair. The policy has been discussed with the council whether they would be developing a recycling site, and repair workshops. So, I suppose that there are various avenues that one can approach; I suppose that the problem of the recession means that people will look at those sorts of criteria with more interest.” (Veronica)

These initiatives attained both social and environmental sustainability goals. On one hand, they led to community enhancement and on the other hand they allowed for the minimisation of waste by recycling resources. Consumer reskilling engages individuals in developing an art of doing and stimulating a sense of self-efficiency and self-reliance. Interpreting craftsmanship in light of pursuing sustainability goals contributes to frame the complexity of the concept of competence as prosumeristic skills. Mobilising craftsmanship abilities entails self-enhancement, satisfaction of being able to auto-produce and minimisation of waste of resources. Reskilling programmes promote sustainability goals by rejuvenating an art of doing, repairing and making community. These observations are in line with Thompson and Coskuner-Balli's (2007) identification of an artisan food culture. That is, participating in a community supported agriculture scheme enables the acquisition of knowledge of seasonal food, cooking skills, growing abilities and the feeling of being connected with the community. In essence, reskilling as a form of prosumeristic consumer competence enhances the feeling of belonging to a community, whereby the collaboration and reciprocal support involved helps to cement the group together (Szmigin et al. 2007a; Moraes et al. 2010, 2012).

6.5 Consumer Competence: Managing Resources

This section presents the third area of consumer competence identified as leading to a sustainable consumption lifestyle. The interpretation of the data shows the importance to distinguish between the two concepts of competence and resource. In consumer behaviour literature, these are, usually, utilised interchangeably, as in the case of the cultural resource-based theory of the customer (Arnould et al. 2006a; Arnould 2007). This study stresses the importance of highlighting consumer competence for managing resources. Moreover, the goal is to deepen the understanding of the reasons why providing information for sustainability has not necessarily translated in implementing sustainable consumption. For, possessing information is very different to having the capacity to build background knowledge to act

sustainably. Consequently, the analysis contributes to the debate upon the limitations of spreading information to make the public audience participate in the sustainability challenge (Davies et al. 2002; Dolan 2002; Bartiaux 2008; Bamossy and Englis 2009).

The following subsections concentrate on the participants' experiences when managing various kinds of resources (information, technology, language, time, money), which they consider as being relevant when seeking to achieve sustainability. Subsection 6.5.1 concentrates on the analysis of the ways informants gain information to be sustainable and apply it. Being able to handle technology is another competence displayed to engage in a sustainable consumption lifestyle (subsection 6.5.2). Considering the concept of consumer savvy, technological sophistication represents the ability to utilise new devices (i.e. laptops, tablets, smartphones) and surf the internet (Nancarrow et al. 2008). It is seen as an efficient means to search for information so as to be able to buy wisely (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Uncles 2008). The results of this study help to extend the definition of technological sophistication in the context of sustainable consumption. That is, the ability to be familiar and able to use advanced technical products is useful for minimising the use of resources (i.e. solar panels). Consequently, technological sophistication in the context of a sustainable lifestyle goes beyond the mere capacity to mobilise technology to search for information and purchase online. Moreover, technical language is another important resource that individuals adopt to understand sustainability so as to improve their chances of achieving it (subsection 6.5.3). Finally, the findings contribute to the ongoing debate on how to strike a balance between time and money when trying to behave sustainably (Reisch 2001).

6.5.1 Being Knowledgeable in Performing Sustainability

Spreading information has been considered to be the primary driver for sustainable consumption behaviour (i.e. Bartiaux 2008). Top-down educational initiatives, though, have been questioned because of their concentration on the cognitive nature of consciousness rather than the practical knowledge underlying sustainable practices (Hobson 2003; Shove 2003). The process of practising and mastering them allows for the formation of the knowledge of how to act sustainably.

Rose's criticism of school education draws attention to the need for an applied type of information to implement sustainability. She highlights a change in the role of schools to endow children with a form of artisan expertise, by comparing her experience as a student with her daughter's.

“Some of the basic cookery skills used to be taught in schools. But now, as far as I can

see, going back to when my daughter did her GRS, she attended a sort of food course... I can't remember what it was called... I think 'cookery artificial'. It is basically about how to be a supermarket consumer; that's about how to design food you get out of the packet. It is not about the basics: how to fry things, how to bake things, how to roast things, how to make a white sauce, how to make a cake. That's sort of basic stuff that you can then build on." (Rose)

Rose denounces the decline in the practical nature of the education offered to children and her critique confirms the spread of cognitive information rather than 'hands-on' tips to practise sustainability. Consequently, consumers look for different paths to gain more practical information to lead a sustainable lifestyle. The informants have attended courses and consulted specialised magazines to acquire this new information so as to enhance their degree of competence.

Judith, Damini, Michael, Irene, all participated in specialised workshops and courses to gain information on specific practices that that would help them to pursue sustainability principles. Judith, Michael and Irene consider permaculture courses as relevant sources of information for their interpretation of sustainability. Michael has applied the information and tools acquired during the attendance of a permaculture course to all the aspects of his life, as shown in the next quote:

"Permaculture is a process for designing sustainable systems. It's not just about gardening. Although, historically, it comes from the combination of two words: permanent and agriculture. But, it very quickly became a method for designing things. So, if you want to make a system that is sustainable, you would use permaculture as a tool. There is a whole series of tools within permaculture that allow you to design anything, from a garden to a community to a financial system. So, it's a set of tools and that is how I came into it. I went to listen to a man's talk and I was just completely blown away by that. You know, suddenly, someone has given me a method, a tool for doing all the things that were wondering around in the back of my head. I went and did a fulltime permaculture design course. And ever since then, it informs almost everything I try and do." (Michael)

Michael applies permaculture information and skills to conduct his life projects in the name of sustainability. The explanation of his experience reveals the necessity to conceptualise competence in terms of the mobilisation and application of resources according to the specific goals pursued rather than simply in terms of possessing resources (Le Boterf 2008a, 2011).

Moreover, his experience highlights the ubiquity of the sustainability goals in the informants' lives.

Similarly, Damini's attendance of a course on foraging information and skills reveals her attempt to pursue the principles of self-reliance as the basis of sustainability. During the course, she obtained information on the characteristics of various types of wild plants so that she would be able to recognise wild edible food.

"The wild food movement is a big movement now. I actually attend a course on wild food. We are going out to the countryside, walk and recognize what it is edible. In the countryside, there is a lot of stuff that you just find everywhere that you can eat. But, you need to recognise them, you need to know which ones by the leaves. There are also books in the library on it [foraging]. I think the book is called "Free food". So, that is very much sustainability because I do not need to buy. For the last three months, I have not bought any spinach. We have eaten so many greens but it is just from the stuff growing under the trees. It is edible, it is tasty, it is nutritious, it is there. I think that it is real sustainability because it is just wonderful how many packages, plastic boxes of spinach, I could have purchased from the supermarket instead of taking what grows for free." (Damini)

Adopting the information gained during these courses enables Damini to forage. Her experience in foraging green leaves in her garden and park next to her house reveals the interconnections between the different areas of consumer competence. In fact, Damini manages her resource, in this case the information obtained in the course on wild food, to identify edible wild leaves. Moreover, she combines her understanding of the processes of disposal of products to explain her engagement in the practice of foraging. In fact, she justifies her choice to eat wild food in terms of limiting the production of waste that would have occurred by purchasing pre-packed vegetables at the supermarket.

Different to the previous courses attended by Michael and Damini where the obtainment of information occurred in exchange for money, Transition Bath organised a free sewing workshop. An expert in sewing shared her experience and gave a demonstration on different sewing techniques. Mutuality and interdependency were at the core of this workshop, because the aim was for the participants to achieve the common sustainable goal of enhancing their degree of self-reliance (Belk and Llamas 2012).

Moreover, they wanted to obtain information and gain skills that would help them to cope with their daily routines, as explained by Brigitte:

“It was a really basic course. The expert showed us a few things, like how a sewing machine works ... Things that are really basic ... Not for long, enough so that people could finish their projects... [She explained] putting patches on clothes, darning socks - that basically means adding material when there is a big hole in the socks. And it is quite useful because if you don't know what you are doing it is difficult to guess it. Well, you can pay somebody to do it but it is expensive. And sometimes I have some jumpers with big holes and I don't want to throw them out.” (Brigitte)

As in Damini's foraging experience, Brigitte's sewing practice reveals how consumers mobilise different dimensions of consumer competence to lead a more sustainable consumption lifestyle. She managed the information and the training obtained during the attendance of the sewing course so as to be able to mend her clothes. That is, she displayed a capacity to manage resources, whilst at the same time engaging in the craftsmanship of auto-production and repairing, as explained in subsection 6.4.1. The informality and the acquisition of a useful but mundane daily skill, namely, darning socks, would most likely not be available in a normal structured sewing class.

The degree of trustworthiness and perception of no commercial aims are the main criteria utilised by the informants to select the sources of their information for sustainability. Judith, Damini, Michael and Irene engaged in courses led by experts in the field to develop further their knowledge on performing sustainable practices. Brigitte revealed how the courses organised under the umbrella name of the subculture of Transition Bath allowed for obtaining information and skills useful for their everyday challenges. Interpersonal networking (Uncles 2008) represents an important vehicle for the obtainment of information and skills to perform sustainability, as revealed by Adele:

“It is this sort of gradual knock-on effect. And then somebody will tell you another new piece of information and you are going: ‘Oh My God, yes, I shouldn't be doing that you know’ So, then you become aware that it is much better to go, you know, by train not by car and try not to fly. And then in terms of food you become aware of food miles, you know what I mean, it's sort of incremental, informal education.” (Adele)

Acquiring information to act sustainably is an ongoing process. Adele is gradually incorporating the information that she gains from her personal contacts to build up her

knowledge to act sustainably. The findings, hence, confirm the role played by networking skills in support of consumers on their path towards sustainability (Hobson 2003; Bertrandias and Vernet 2012).

In line with the literature, the data reveal how consumers rely upon personal contacts to get information and suggestions regarding their consumption dilemmas. However, the results of this study enhance the definition of interpersonal networking underpinning the concept of consumer savvy (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Garnier and Macdonald 2009). That is, in contrast to extant work, the findings show how interpersonal networking is a competence to manage human contacts not only to obtain purchasing advice, but also practical skills regarding consumption.

Moreover, these findings demonstrate how interpersonal networking helps consumers to feel reassured about the fairness of the brand suggestions received. This resonates with consumers' fear of green-washing by companies, as discussed in subsection 2.5.2 and consumers, in fact, are sceptical about the real corporate commitment in the sustainability agenda (Horiuchi et al. 2009; Jahdi and Acikdilli 2009). They rely upon interpersonal networking as trustworthy sources of information, as observed during the Open Home Weekend event.

“The tour of the house has almost come to its end. We climb down the stairs and the owner addresses our attention towards a table in the corner. On this table there are several business cards and leaflets of the companies that have helped him to develop his projects of refurbishment and insulation of his house. He says how satisfied he is about the quality of the products, materials and the jobs done in the house. He highly encourages us to have a look at the different business cards and to pick the ones that we are interested in. He declares that honest promotion of his suppliers is the minimum that he can do to reward them for their jobs.” (Field note taken in attending the Open Home Weekend)

Trustworthiness of the sources of information is considered, hence, fundamental to pursuing sustainability ideals.

Consumers also seek information in official magazines when they feel that there is no intention to promote a specific brand, as explained by Owen:

“There is a magazine called the ‘Which?’ magazine. It gives reports on which shall I buy? Which is the best value? Which good is the cheapest to run or which will not

break down? Which will have the longer life? So this magazine was run by an association called the consumer association, which begun around forty years ago, forty-five years ago. It was begun by a fairly philanthropic person and he wanted to enable consumers to know what they were buying so that they could buy something that would last. And something that was good value.” (Owen)

Information and skills obtained in informal networking, by attending particular courses and/or reading specialised magazines represent the bedrock of consumers’ information for sustainability.

6.5.2 Being Technologically Sophisticated

Technology represents another resource adopted by consumers to achieve their sustainability objectives. The concept of consumer savvy covers technological sophistication in terms of consumers’ capacity to use new technical devices and feel at ease in searching for information and purchasing on the internet (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Uncles 2008; Garnier and Macdonald 2009). The degree of capacity to capitalise on technology may vary within the population, as contended by Owen.

“I think that more recently things like ... the internet and the telephone ... and the way people advertise ... you can find much more about products before you buy them. But the people who find out products on the internet are only a proportion. Other people will go out and purchase solely according to the price and, then, they buy something that won't last very long. And that's you know, the improved or increased consumers skills tend again to be available to middle class people and upper class people.”
(Owen)

In line with literature discoveries, technological sophistication facilitates consumers looking for information online and variations in this may be intensified by age differences as well as social class. Owen’s considerations confirm Roberts and Manolis (2000) and Berg and Teigen’s (2009) findings that connect differences in technological sophistication to consumers’ demographics.

Besides being familiar with new technologies and feeling confident in searching on the World Wide Web, technological sophistication for sustainability also involves the ability to use technological devices to minimise the use of resources.

For example, comprehending the technological functioning of appliances that monitor the use of energy, favours the limitation of energy consumption, as exemplified by Tom.

“I spent a whole year taking measurements for my electricity and I got this machine that tells how much electricity I use. So, it monitors the flow of electricity into the house. The objective was to reduce my usage of energy within what I could do.” (Tom)

Therefore, technological sophistication for sustainability includes also the capacity to use technological devices that allow consumers to reduce their level of resources. David’s technological sophistication allows him not only to decrease his family’s energy consumption, but also to produce energy.

“We don't have any need for electricity for hot water in the summer, that's all dealt with through the solar panels. And in the winter we reduce our heating bills by having the wood burning stove fitted in the back. We have looked at the two periods of the year at how we can reduce our bills and we are dealing with that. And the next stage would be the photovoltaic on the roofs to actually deliver the electricity. But that's another phase in the future that we want to do in our house. So, eventually, we won't quite be carbon neutral, zero carbon, but we will be fairly close to it. We would have a very well insulated building; we will be generating hot water in the summer, heating in the winter without the need to go for gas. With photovoltaic we won't need to then use the national grid for electricity.” (David)

David’s knowledge of the technical functioning of appliances allows for the successful management of energy consumption. His competence has supported him in implementing the insulating projects that he has already taken and he can imagine the further steps that he can take to improve the insulation of his home. That is, solar panels produce hot water in the summer and the wood burning stove provides heat during the winter, while in the future a photovoltaic cell will support David and his family in their attempts to achieve a sense of independence from the marketplace. He and his family feel self-reliant by using and benefitting from the technical features of these appliances.

6.5.3 Talking the ‘Sustainability Language’

Consumers face challenges in performing a sustainable lifestyle, such as information overload, which provoke consumer confusion and doubts. The language adopted to express products’ sustainable credentials and/or to communicate corporate engagement in a sustainable cause is complex and, at times, obscure. Consequently, mastering that employed in the field of

sustainability issues represents a useful competence. For, specialised language, specifically technical jargon, represents a barrier and a threat for consumers to commit to sustainability. Consequently, the language adopted to communicate sustainability should be more easily comprehensible for a non-specialised audience, as contended by Pamela Warhust³:

“Ms Warhust poses as question: “How do we engage people that have never been involved in these dialogues [about sustainability]?”. She affirms that the aim is to shift people’s behaviours to make them become more responsible and sustainable. She attributes to language a crucial role to respond to this goal. She explains how language is important for sensitising citizens to the sustainability discourse. She considers the common language of food as a vehicle through which to unite the community. Moreover, food is a language spoken by everyone. It is then easier to communicate difficult and abstract sustainability ideals through the common language of food..”
(Food note taken during the attendance of the Transition Bath talk “How can we grow more food locally?”)

Ms Warhust founded voluntary gardening initiatives to sensitise the community of Todmorden, West Yorkshire. Discussing about sustainability issues can be intimidating not only because of the description of the actual environmental and social deficiencies, but also because of the language utilised to explain them. That is, sustainability may be an abstract and difficult topic to understand, therefore, using a simple language helps consumers to relate to its agenda.

Furthermore, engaging in sustainable consumption requires understanding of the technicalities of the devices described in the previous subsection 6.5.2, for consumers have to be familiar with the technical characteristics of these appliances and their application methods. For example, the Open Home Weekend provided an opportunity to enhance the understanding of potential refurbishing projects:

“The owner makes his way up to the last floor and asks us to follow him. He wants to show us the loft insulation. He explains that the insulation is made of user friendly 200mm thick sheep’s wool. He starts to adopt a quite technical language to describe the various alternatives of insulation. Mineral ‘wool’ and fibre glass are other two types of insulation. He preferred to use sheep’s wool because it maintains a warm temperature in the house during winter and a cooler one during summer. In this way,

³ Pamela Warhust is the founder of the project Incredible Edible in the town of Todmorden, West Yorkshire, as explained in subsection 5.3.4

as he says: “a lower embodied energy is achieved.” (Field note taken at the Open Home Weekend)

The owner uses a technical language to justify his choices of refurbishment and he is able to understand the technical characteristics of the various insulation types, because he has mastered this technical jargon. Knowing this technical language allows him to choose the insulation program, together with materials and devices, hence being able to respond to his family's needs in accord with his interpretation of sustainability. Understanding the language spoken with regards to sustainability issues is thus an important resource to manage. For, it enables consumers to connect with the sustainability issues affecting their daily routines as well as supporting them when choosing projects and commercial offers that will meet their requirements.

6.5.4 Managing the Trade-off between Time and Money

The capacity to balance time and money is at the heart of engaging with a sustainable lifestyle. Time is an important resource to engage in craftsmanship practices (i.e. sewing, cooking, mending) (Campbell 2005; Watson and Shove 2008) and time management is also important during the search for information about sustainable offers, because nowadays a vast amount of information is available (Valor 2008). In the next quote, Damini reflects upon her trade-off between time and money in conducting her artisan practices.

“The old skills are: being able to stitch your clothes, mend a hole in your dress, and knit your own cardigan. It is so cheap to buy a knitted cardigan from the shop now. It takes me more time and, therefore, more money to knit my own. But if the cheap one was not available, I would learn to continue to knit, and it would reduce, I am sure the amount of manufacturing that has to take place. It must be cheaper and more energy efficient to sell wool to people and let them make their own cardigan than to manufacture lots of massed produced cardigans. It must be, so you don't have factories generating mass produced clothing in the way that it is today.” (Damini)

Damini declares that there is a higher cost in terms of time and money to engage in productive consumption activities. This disadvantageous ratio in terms of both commodities confirms the position taken in literature, where it is proffered that consuming responsibly may be costly and time consuming (Reisch 2001; Valor 2008). Damini's reasoning is based upon the mobilisation of different dimensions of consumer competence. Despite the fact she displays manual crafts to produce their own garments, as explained in subsection 6.4.1, she spends both a lot of time and money to craft in the name of sustainability goals. At the same time, she is knowledgeable

about the functioning of marketplace production processes, as presented in subsection 6.3.1. In fact, she accuses the mass production system as being responsible for the gradual loss of a competence of doing. Judith expands further Damini's point by stating that:

"It is important to have a sort of emotional skill ... life management skill to make time in our life. We don't learn practical skills because kids want to play on their Wii. And I think that life has got less physical; children don't play outside so much, so they are less likely to be making stuff. Why bother to make clothes when we can buy them. So, lots of people don't have sewing machines, they don't know how to use sewing machines, they haven't be told how to sew." (Judith)

Judith observes an interesting parallel between the degree of materiality and immateriality in the conduct of Western lifestyles. In line with Damini, she bemoans the loss of artisanship skills and a consequent decrease in productive consumption, specifically among the new generations. Hence, she contends that the actual consumer competence has a more abstract nature rather than a practical one. In fact, children are increasingly technologically savvy, but they rarely perform creative manual practices, which would actually enable them to produce something tangible. Crafting skills are gradually lost and, consequently, also the materials adopted for their enactment slowly disappear from the household (i.e. sewing machines).

6.6 Dynamic Nature of Consumer Competence

The previous three sections have concentrated on the three dimensions of consumer competence when performing sustainable consumption. As the data interpretation for each section has demonstrated, these three dimensions do not exist in isolation from each other, for the informants combine them and their sub-dimensions with the aim of leading a sustainable lifestyle, without being necessarily expert in all three. The guerrilla gardening, engaged in by Kate, Irene, Rose, Judith and Veronica, is a further demonstration of how consumers mobilise the different dimensions of consumer competence to perform practices driven by specific sustainability goals. Kate's account of her performance during this gardening clearly shows the mobilisation of various dimensions of such competence.

"I think it [guerrilla gardening] is very multifaceted. I think that there are many aspects to it. Firstly, it is about growing things locally and reducing the amount that it is flown in plastic bags. It has to do with raising the awareness of most people that growing is possible. You can grow things and eat them. And we get a lot of people who stop by, who are quite interested in getting involved with growing in some ways. And we talk to them about how they could get involved with the BOG garden, or guerrilla gardening

or, you know, doing a course of all kinds of things. So, that's kind of talking to people and encouraging them to think about growing, even on the kitchen windows, anything. It feels that you don't have any power but by doing our small bit we can make a difference. I mean it is community, as well. Because around some of the gardens, actually, little communities of people build; who live near it and who didn't know each other before and they get to know each other around the garden.” (Kate)

Kate mobilises her growing skills that represent a craftsmanship of doing, as revealed in subsection 6.4.1, whereby she is familiar with gardening tools, knows gardening techniques and understands food seasonality. Moreover, she combines her craft competence as a means to deliver her reskilling, as explained in subsection 6.4.3. In essence, guerrilla gardening conveys abstract principles of sustainability through the language of food. It is not theoretical propaganda, but, instead, it makes consumers feel that they have learnt a skill, namely gardening, that they can use throughout their lives. In the case of guerrilla gardening raising awareness occurs not through standard talks on topics, such as peak oil. On the contrary, her ability engages people with a core manual activity through which she is able to make them understand the benefits of supporting the local economy and the damaging environmental effects of flying in food. In addition, her understanding of production/distribution/disposal processes (subsection 6.3.1) supports Kate in her productive consumption experiences. In sum, she conceives guerrilla gardening as a way to minimise carbon footprints generated by acquiring prewashed packets of vegetables flown in from far away.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has considered the multifaceted nature of consumer competence as the basis of a sustainable consumption lifestyle. It has been elicited that being competent entails the personalised mobilisation of three different dimensions. That is, the data interpretation reveals that framing the conceptualisation of competence involves handling different types of knowledge, skills and abilities, with thus confirms the HR management and education traditions regarding this phenomenon. Consequently, competence is defined here in terms of its dynamic nature rather than as a mere addition of elements.

The primary contribution of this chapter has been the extension of the definition of consumer competence beyond product expertise (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). For, besides the capacity to read labels and recognise sustainable brands, understanding of production/distribution/disposal processes and knowledge of product origins have all been found as being prerequisites to attaining such competence. The definition of product expertise in some of the extant literature is focused on consumer knowledge of product categories and offers (Alba and Hutchinson 1987);

consequently, it revolves around the antecedents and process of purchasing. This study reinforces the extension of the domain of consumer competence beyond purchasing, for it has emerged that craftsmanship skills and their productive nature employed whilst pursue sustainability goals are also aspects that should be included in consumer competence (Campbell 2005; Fabris 2008; Moisio et al. 2013).

Finally, the identification of the third dimension of consumer competence provides further clarification of the relation between the concepts of resource and competence in consumer research (Arnould et al. 2006a; Arnould 2007; Carù 2007). That is, results demonstrate the importance of conceiving competence as an overarching concept in respect to the one of resource and in fact, having resources does not necessarily translate into the capacity to apply them. These considerations reinforce the critiques that claim that providing information on sustainability issues does not necessarily translate into acting upon it (Bartiaux 2008; Evans and Jackson 2008).

The next chapter sheds insights upon the role played by consumer competence in coping with the complexity of leading a sustainable consumption lifestyle.

7 LIVING SUSTAINABILITY AS A COMPETENT CONSUMER

7.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the second research question shaping this study and thus, aims to deepening the understanding of the role played by consumer competence when faced with the complexity of leading a sustainable consumption lifestyle.

Sustainability is a societal challenge, as explained in section 2.2, with its implementation being based upon the intergenerational and intragenerational bargain (McGregor et al. 2000; Collard 2000, 2001; Markandya and Mason 2000). Section 7.2 provides insights into the role played by consumer competence in materialising the principles of reciprocity and interdependence characterising the sustainability agenda. The findings enhance the comprehension of the ways consumers share their competence to improve their knowledge and skills so as to perform sustainability. Being expert in a specific sustainability domain conveys the role on the informant of embodied resource. Section 7.3 highlights how consumer competence encourages informants to care for products and their processes of production. Specifically, consumer knowledge of the difficult working conditions of Third World producers helps them to care about the products that they consume and consequently, they attribute more value as well as attention to the resources that they use. Section 7.4 clarifies the role played by competence in the compromises necessary to attain sustainability within the complexity of consumers' everyday lives. These findings contribute to the debate on the 'duty conflicts' lived when practising a sustainable lifestyle (Prothero et al. 2010) in that my data interpretation confirms that consumers live 'coherent inconsistencies' (Moraes et al. 2012) in performing sustainable consumption.

Being knowledgeable about production processes enables consumers to judge corporate conduct. The majority of studies define consumer competence as a means to evaluate products and the functioning of the market (Berg 2007; Berg and Teigen 2009). Section 7.5 extends further the understanding of the extent to which competence supports consumers' ability to judge the marketplace. It emerges that the informants are frustrated because they recognise the downsides of the market structure that impede them when they trying to live up to their sustainability ideals. Finally, section 7.6 presents the key finding of this chapter, which is that more information on the social, environmental and economic effects of consumption practices does not necessarily facilitate a sustainable lifestyle. In fact, in performing a specific practice a consumer can act in accordance with sustainable environmental principles whilst ignoring social ones or vice versa. For, having a wide knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages of performing a consumption practice in terms of sustainability results in consumer indecision and

thus, hinders engagement in a particular practice. Hence, these results lead to the questioning of the assumption that awareness of sustainability issues necessarily helps consumers to live sustainably and consequently, the revelation regarding the controversial role of knowledge (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Moisander 2007) is provided with additional understanding. Specifically, in the case of contradictory information, consumers question whether they are taking the 'right decision' (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Bamossy and Englis 2009; Eckhardt et al. 2010) owing to the effects of information overload (Moisander 2007; Bartiaux 2008).

7.2 Sharing Competence to Create a Sustainable Community

This section shows how consumers react to the complexity of sustainability by sharing their competences to work towards the implementation of a more sustainable society. The data interpretation shows how sharing practical competence represents a valid alternative to the dissemination of environmentally-friendly information. Thus, the findings support the assumption that spreading information does not necessarily translate into the diffusion of sustainable behaviours (Carrington et al. 2010; Devinney et al. 2010; Eckhardt et al. 2010). This confirms the position taken by Adkins and Ozanne (2005a), who have contended that developing consumers' abilities enhances literacy skills. The first subsection 7.2.1 discusses how experts in a sustainability domain become embodied resources of competence for other people interested in engaging in sustainability. The results confirm the empowering effect of mastering practical competence. Moreover, the data reveal how competence represents a means of distinction for the experts. Hence, expertise is a source of recognition, as has been found to be the case in other contexts (Meuter et al. 2005; Fuller 2006). Subsection 7.2.2 discusses how mobilising consumer competence allows individuals to cope with their sustainability challenges by developing a sense of community.

7.2.1 Becoming an Embodied Resource by Sharing Competence

This subsection probes the different paths taken to pursue the materialisation of sustainability ideals. Education campaigns represented the most salient activities aimed at raising awareness of the sustainability agenda. Distributing information has been criticised as not being a viable way to sensitise the public audience to the sustainability discourse, for as explained in subsection 2.5.1, top-down educational perspectives have been criticised for their abstract nature (Burgess et al. 1998; Owens 2000). The findings of this section align with those from a stream of literature on the grassroots initiatives that have been established as an alternative path to spread sustainability (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Moraes et al. 2010, 2012). These pieces of research focused upon a community culture as the root for the diffusion of sustainability principles.

By contrast, the following quotes reveal how individuals who feel they are expert in a specific sustainability issue share their know how with others. Owen describes his commitment to sharing his skills by stating that:

"I am interested in teaching other people to learn from what we learnt. Not pushing at them but being: "here I am, I am a resource, would you like to use me?" (Owen)

Owen is particularly knowledgeable in insulating and refurbishing projects for minimising the use of energy. He defines himself as a source of competence for others (Leonard-Barton 1981; Shove and Walker 2010). Similarly, Tessa feels the need to share her craftsmanship skills with others interested in acquiring them. She was the expert who led the sewing workshop organised under the umbrella name of Transition Bath.

"The Transition Bath thing that I did [the sewing workshop] was good. And, I want to do more and all that sort of thing. Yeah, it was very satisfying that those sorts of simple skills, like teaching somebody how to use a sewing machine, can mean a lot to that person. You know, like to me, that is so normal that it really doesn't mean anything, but for people who have never done that before, they were really amazed that they were now able to repair their trousers and carry on wearing them. For me, I lost a long time ago the feeling of how amazing it is to be able to use a sewing machine, because I have always been able to use one since I can remember. So, if I want a pair of curtains, I just make a pair of curtains. I don't have to go around and buy very expensive things I suppose. So, that sharing of that sort of skills is very nice, it is really nice; it is a very good thing to do. You can say to a friend: "Yeah, just bring the chair around and we can put a new cushion on it. Or if you want me to fix your jacket, then I will fix the jacket for you". I would like to teach other people these skills because, as I said, I do think that it is empowering for people to have these skills. I would like to have more skills myself though, rather than me relying on other people." (Tessa)

Tessa has been able to sew since an early age and likes to share her skills with other people. She mends other people's garments so as to stop them throwing their clothes away when they need repair and hence, having to buy new ones. Tessa not only mends for others, but she also shares her competence, which she teaches to other people, thus they can independently mend and build up their manual skills. She shares how empowering it is for other people to be taught craftsmanship skills. In fact, the participants in the sewing workshop gained a sense of independence and self-reliance by acquiring the ability of being able to sew. Consequently, they perceive that they have reduced their dependence on others and on the commercial system.

Irene's guerrilla gardening experience confirms how the transference of competence between experts and novices supports individual and collective goals.

"All the people who were today at Vegmead [a community garden initiated by Transition Bath volunteers], also those who are very involved, don't know how to garden. So, to the best of my ability, I am teaching them. And, yeah, like Luke, Bill and Frank absolutely don't know. So, they are learning everything and I really like that. But they want to come, I don't know if they want to learn or it is an incidental part of being there, because they want to be outside and doing something. But they will never forget how to plant broccoli which is what they learnt today. And that's one of my favourite reasons why I am doing it." (Irene)

Irene's commitment to teach other people how to garden is beneficial both for these people and for the advancement of the sustainability projects, in this case the guerrilla gardening activities. The interaction between experts and novices allows the latter to develop their skills. Both Tessa and Irene are focussing their efforts on mobilising and sharing the craftsmanship dimension of consumer competence. They engage with other people to transfer skills that the learners will be able to use and develop throughout their life projects. The Open Home Weekend event represented an opportunity to share and learn brand and corporate names of those who supply energy efficient appliances or who are specialised in carrying out refurbishing projects. The interpretation of the following field note reveals the sharing of brand and product knowledge between experts and novices:

"The woman of the couple asks for clarification from the owner: "Can you please tell us the brand of your boiler? We do have difficulties to find a good energy efficient one". The owner tells her that his boiler is brand X. He explains that he is satisfied about his choice and that he has not encountered any problem till now." (Field note taken during the Open Home Weekend event)

This field note reveals how the organisation of these grassroots initiatives by Transition Bath provide a learning experience for other people interested in reducing their energy consumption. As explained in subsection 6.5.1, participants in the event were able to extend their knowledge of sustainable brands and corporations. In the case described above, the owners gave information about the brands of the appliances that satisfied their sustainability requirements. The participants trusted the experiences and judgments of these expert owners, because of the investment in terms of time and effort they had made to realise these long term refurbishing projects.

The findings, hence, contribute to the literature on interpersonal calibration of knowledge (Price and Feick 1984; Bertrandias and Vernet 2012). Tessa and Irene's practical expertise and the energy-efficient home owners' broad technical knowledge represent trusted sources of competence. Problems of interpersonal calibration of knowledge were overcome, because of the direct interaction between experts and novices and also in view of the practical demonstration that the experts provided. The findings demonstrate how these individuals overcame problems of interpersonal calibration of knowledge by choosing sources that were perceived as having genuineness and credibility. Moreover, Owen, Tessa, Irene and the home owners can be considered as being embodied trustworthy resources, because they have a commercial disinterest in suggesting a particular brand or project over another. For example, in the following passage David reveals how he is taken as point of reference for advice on anything related to energy saving:

"You don't need to have the background that I have got. The people that I know that have done this [energy-efficient refurbishment], just have a passion for it. They came to me. They asked me. I took them through the initial process; it was telling them what they could do. So, you know, I get a lot of people just asking my advice. So, probably, my main support is my background and, plus, my ability to be able to talk to people. You know, I have done, I designed quite a lot of buildings where I incorporated some of this, not a lot of this [techniques and appliances present in his house]. This is quite unique because it's a particular refurbishment of a particular building in a particular point of time. And there would never be another one like this. So, there are a lot of unique things that you have to work with when you are dealing with a building like this. But it's not something that I have ever found I'm scared of, for obvious reasons."
(David)

David is looked up as a source of competence by other individuals who are interested in engaging in similar refurbishing projects as the ones that he conducted in his house. He shares his knowledge on designing energy efficient solutions without the commercial interest of being the person who will be paid to do these projects. There is appreciation for his neutrality of judgment by the consumers, for many have expressed their mistrust of the marketing and governmental claims, perceiving them as being biased. David's narration of his experience as an "embodied resource of competence" reveals how his expertise represents a means through which he gains status and recognition (McGregor 2002; Soper 2007). That is, he distinguishes himself by having a high level of expertise enabling him to materialise his sustainability ideals. Thus, competence functions as a linking value (Cova 1997), whereby it is the element through which consumers distinguish themselves and gain recognition in the process of implementing

sustainability. These findings confirm the literature perspective that in online environments consumers share their competence to gain recognition by other consumers and the company for their actions (Meuter et al. 2005; Fuller 2006).

7.2.2 Competence to Create Community

Whilst the previous section presented the role exerted by competence in support of the implementation of personal sustainability projects, this subsection demonstrates how sharing competence positively affects the pursuit of collective sustainability goals. In essence, sharing competence facilitates the creation of community bonds. As revealed by Irene, sharing gardening skills nurtures a collective sentiment of attachment for the piece of land gardenized:

"At the grove walk [guerrilla garden] (...) there are signs up saying: "Started by Bath guerrilla gardeners. Free to plant and pick, help yourself!" People usually read that before they start talking to you and they kind of say: "Oh, do not plant anything tonight or someone would pick it". And we say: "Oh no, this is free for anyone". And a man said: "This is amazingly generous" or something like that. Or people say: "This is a lovely idea, well done". I mean, I have only had heard one negative feedback about guerrilla gardening and hundreds of people particularly said to Kate: "Oh, I really like what you are doing, it is a great idea". I think it is heart-warming and it shows that people are caring about their communal community spaces. And more often there is evidence of people not caring about communal spaces. Whereas I have noticed that the minute I have started working on a public space, I mean, it feels like I want to go around and pick up litter. I have done it [guerrilla gardening and community gardening] in the immediate vicinities of where I am working. So, I suddenly feel responsible for making somewhere nice. And wouldn't it be a wonderful world if all would do like that. Rather than just thinking: "Why the rubbish collectors can't come and do it?" (Irene)

Irene's experience of guerrilla gardening helps in the understanding of how competence fosters the development of a sentiment of community and attachment to public spaces. Growing skills represent the core dimension of competence mobilised to perform guerrilla gardening, which is a practice that sensitises public audiences to the environmental and social effects of local food production and consumption. Moreover, the competence displayed and shared with others to create and maintain guerrilla gardens represents a source of connection with the land, and broadly the community benefitting from it.

Competence as a source of community bonding is also reinforced by Kate's experience at the Transition Bath nuttery.

"Kate: It [nuttery] was an unused piece of land. Basically, we have planted nut trees on it. There are between twenty and thirty trees; have you been there? It will produce a crop over time but the people who walk by, they get involved with it. One day we were planting the bushes there. I can't remember who it was but somebody was having trouble digging a hole.

I: It was me.

Kate: Oh, it was you. Yes, when I started telling it, I thought it was you... And, there was a man, who hadn't anything to do with it, he was walking down. And he just jumped over, he came and he did it. But now, he will always feel like a little bit of an owner of some of that. A 'participant owner' not 'it's mine owner'. And, he will help to guard it and keep it safe. And if anything is missed, if a fence got broken down or something, he would be concerned about it. He would get in touch with somebody, you know, that kind of involvement." (Kate)

"I was trying to dig a hole in the soil to plant a berry bush. I was facing difficulties to push the spade in the ground. A man passed by in that precise moment and he came to help me to do it. He took the spade and did the job. He, then, asked us about the nuttery and about Transition Bath." (Field note taken at the Transition Bath nuttery)

Displaying gardening skills to participate in shaping a communal space stimulates a connection with the land and the community. As such, these findings add to the understanding of the ways consumers form links with communal spaces. From the perspective of consumer competence regarding these skills it is the connections between citizens and a sense of belonging as well as attachment to their land and community through which it is exercised (Visconti et al. 2010; Chatzidakis et al. 2012). These alternative modes of consumption could be claimed to be more engaging than standard informational events.

The insights gained by the previous experiences of guerrilla gardening and growing at the nuttery have revealed the potential role played by competence to stimulate consumers' connections with communal public spaces. The following quote by Owen directs the attention towards envisioning a competence to create community on the basis of a neighbourhood skill.

"What is the vision? What is the picture for a more-sustainable way of living? What is the picture for a simpler way of living? What is the picture for sharing skills? While you

have been in England, you may have seen a programme on television called 'Grand Designs' by somebody called Kevin McCloud. He quotes the projection about needing two planets. And he said: 'Let's look at just the basic ways. We all have a lot of power tools. So, we have drills, we have edgers and all these sorts of things. The average time per year we each use them, it is like ten minutes. But we all go out and buy different ones'. Can we see a world where groups of houses work together like a community? They work like a club where we lend these tools to each other. Rather than each other going out and buying them. Where we lived before in Bristol we had a ladder to go outside of the house. We purchased that as a group in the neighbourhood. And now everybody buys their own electric tools. So, they have a drill, they have a hammer, they have a saw, they have all the things; they are all in these houses here, and they are not used very often. Isn't it crazy? Why don't we buy them collectively? And we don't have that neighbourhood skill, we could have, we should have. So, it is about looking ahead not about looking back, not thirsting for the times gone by.' (Owen)

Owen's previous experience of sharing a ladder among his neighbours represents a mundane example of a 'neighbourhood skill' that he refers to. His experience drives the attention towards the centrality played by interdependence and accessibility in pursuing sustainability goals. Owen's 'neighbourhood skill' supports the notion of interpersonal networking underpinning the concept of consumer savvy (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Nancarrow et al. 2008, 2011; Uncles 2008). Networking with known and unknown people represents a source of information to become aware of other brands and substitute products options (Garnier and Macdonald 2009). Owen's experience illustrates networking in terms of the development of a 'neighbourhood skill', which favours the performance of collective consumption practices. Accessibility of people, goods and competencies is a major of the accomplishment of community initiatives.

Similarly, Judith notes the accessibility of 'old-fashioned' skills and the challenge to revive them for the future.

"When my dad died, he was in his nineties. He knew all sorts of things that people don't know now. They [practical skills] could be useful in the future or they might not be. I feel that older people need to try and hold those [manual skills] in the culture, even though they may never be useful. As a kind of ... like having a gene bank or a seed bank ... you have this little skill bank just in case you need to know how to do something easily. People used to know how to do quick knots and make things fast. All sort of small things: how to sharpen a knife, how to sharpen a chisel. People don't know any of these. They don't know how to make a little handle out of wood. They don't know how to

mend anything or fix anything or simple stuff. So, those skills may be held in this kind of skill bank. The small amount of most domestic things is harder to hand on somehow.”
(Judith)

Judith wonders whether old manual abilities could represent a valuable toolbox to be used in the future, pondering whether these skills would be useful to support self-reliant sustainable lifestyles. In so doing, she draws attention towards the challenge to keep them alive and hence, enhance the intergenerational bargain (Markandya and Mason 2000), musing about how it could be possible to store an immaterial entity, like competence. The image of the ‘skill bank’ highlights the importance of reflecting upon the trajectories of preservation, transfer and spread of skills between generations. To build a skill bank, competence needs to be shared among different carriers of the practices of sustaining.

7.3 Caring: The Role of Consumer Competence

This section reveals how consumer competence enhances individuals’ sense of care when conducting consumption practices. Pursuing sustainability goals entails a particular kind of skill, an ability to care (Shaw et al. forthcoming), as revealed by Irene.

“It is about taking a sort of proper care of things. And I think that ‘care’ is a word that has been downgraded a lot. Instead of sounding like what kind of washing powder you use but it is about relating to things. When you go to a supermarket and you buy something and half of it you put into the bin, there is no taking care. On the contrary, slogging our guts out in growing vegetables in that new place [Vegmead community garden] And, then, when we get some vegetables from that garden we are going to know how much work has gone into it. And just really cherish that vegetable. And, you know, it is going taste really nice and we will be very glad and feel proud of it, I think. And that feels like taking care and that's a very direct relationship with the food and the growing. But there is that aspect in everything. Like, if we are buying clothes we can be bothered to find out how they have been made and where the cotton comes from and so on. And that is another way of taking care of how we are interacting with the world.”
(Irene)

To act in accordance with her sustainability principles, Irene shows a sense of care and respect for goods and their production processes, for when she purchases, she looks for things other than functional benefits. In fact, she is attentive to the content of her shopping trolley as she makes an effort to know its production origins and plans its use so not to waste it. Her productive consumption experiences reveal an interesting relationship between the concepts of

competence and that of care. In essence, the relation between the two might be defined as a virtuous circle, whereby her knowledge of production processes, as well as her craftsmanship skills, improve her sensitivity to care for products. At the same time, her respect for resources/goods pushes her to advance her competence in terms of knowledge of products' origins, materials and characteristics. This relation between the concepts of care and competence highlights the complex nature of the latter, for it goes beyond an expertise to purchase and knowing the functioning of the market (Titus and Bradford 1996; Berg 2007; Berg and Teigen 2009). Brigitte's feeling of being connected with products and their producers further illustrates the sense of care experienced by consumers in leading a sustainable lifestyle:

"Sometimes you see an object, for example the sugar. And I imagine the faces of the people growing the sugar; the people collecting it, transporting it. What kind of humanity can it give to you? And I am pretty sure that it was collected in the Dominican Republic. I think that it is not so much about money but it is also about being proud of not exploiting too much others. Or, if you do it, nearly creating a link with the people who produce the things, even if you don't know them. I think that many people connect by adding to something that it is theirs. (...) They sort of give back a bit of dignity to the objects; by cooking this sugar nicely it is a sort of way to give its dignity back."
(Brigitte)

As with Irene, Brigitte's care is based upon a strong connection with products by acquiring knowledge about manufacturing practices as well as the labour time, human effort and the amount of resources needed to create products. Her knowledge represents a rational component of her emotional ability to care, which demonstrates her proclivity to be able to connect with material things and to attribute value to them. Purchasing Fair Trade products is for Brigitte a meaningful act of voting (Golding 2009; Zaman et al. 2010); her emotional engagement in this practice shows the connection that she, as a consumer, feels with the products and, specifically their producers. This emotional engagement embodies the interpretation of the principles of connectivity and equity in sustainability.

This sense of connectivity is strictly connected with the concept of linking value (Cova 1997). Regarding which, this author defined products as means of creating bonding between people, whereby the fact of possessing a particular brand makes you feel connected with other consumers having the same brand. Hence, in conducting practices aimed at matching sustainability goals, not only the products, but also the competence to purchase them is endowed with a linking value. It is the competence at the basis of the practice that acquires a

linking value in that this enables the setting up of the connections between other consumers who believe in the sustainability agenda and the producers who have realised the products.

7.4 Being Competent: Coping with Compromises

Compromises are at the basis of the conduct of a sustainable lifestyle (Szmigin et al. 2007b; McEachern et al. 2010), as explained in subsection 2.5.2 and adapting lifestyles to the sustainability requirements can be challenging, as explained by Judith:

“Compromise is all the time being inconsistent, being patient and forgiving. As we move along [in conducting a more sustainable lifestyle], it is a sort of learning process, really. You are building up a body of practice and knowledge. And holding to some idea that is different, that may or may not be used in the future. That's how I look at it.”
(Judith)

Her experience highlights the evolving and winding path that she travels along to attain her sustainability goals. Developing competence and coping with compromises constitute a learning process. “Being inconsistent” emphasises the contradictions and “coherent inconsistencies” that emerge in leading a sustainable lifestyle (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Newholm 2005; Moraes et al. 2012). “Being patient and forgiving” are consequences of the difficulties and obstacles that she encounters in the attempt to achieve sustainability objectives in that she can herself when she fails to act sustainably. In essence, she struggles when she is influenced by contextual barriers and “duty conflicts”, which are driven by opposing priorities (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Prothero et al. 2011). Irene confirms that leading a sustainable lifestyle is not a linear process and that it is characterised by ongoing indecisiveness and confusion.

“On one hand I want to be local, low carbon and organic and all these other adjectives, which are connected to sustainability. And on the other hand, I want something nice to eat that I can afford. And those things sometimes don't go together easily. So when I have low energy or I am a bit overstretched about things, trying to live sustainably feels like a life of deprivation.” (Irene)

Irene's life project has become disharmonious, because of a sensation of confinement and unpleasant effort linked to constantly living sustainably. She, hence, experiences stress and dilemmas when trying to match her sustainability ideals with her daily life commitments and expectations. As stated by David: “leading a sustainable lifestyle is quite an emotional rollercoaster”. Consumers, thus, can experience a sensation of anxiety when they fail to attain their sustainability ideals, because of the contrasting ends guiding their life projects.

For example, Irene occasionally purchases ready-made meals when her involvement in her professional life project overtakes her engagement in being sustainable, which demands that she should be cooking from scratch:

“When I try to finish an event, for example, I am so exhausted that I go out and buy food in a packet to eat straight away. Because I don't have the energy to cook and I don't feel like having the energy to cook. Whereas making stuff from raw materials takes time and it's having that time and the energy to do it that helps you eat more sustainably. Usually, I love doing these things. I make my own bread; I am quite a good cook and I have been trained in cooking. Living sustainably feels like you personally need to be quite emotionally involved. So you need to be sort of calm and make time in your life to do the walking, the cooking, and not need comfort food like. So, for example, when you are stressed out emotionally or lacking in time and I am rushing to get the work done and stuff, the easiest thing to do is go to the supermarket and buy a ready meal, which is the worst carbon thing to do.” (Irene)

Irene feels frustrated because she possesses the skills that would enable her to cook and be sustainable, but she does not act sustainably owing to a lack of time and contextual working pressures. She compromises her commitment to sustainability by preferring convenience and practicality. She highlights the importance of having the ability “to make time in everyday life” to pursue sustainability successfully. Consequently, her experience reinforces the discussion on the management of the trade-off between time and money as discussed in subsection 6.5.4. A barrier to the implementation of sustainability lies in the lack of available time to dedicate to the development of the self and to engage in practices which are more respectful of resources (Lastovicka et al. 1999; Arnould 2003; Todd and Lawson 2003; Witkowski 2003; Pepper et al. 2009; Evans 2011). This, in turn, highlights how personal and structural barriers constrain the enactment of sustainability (Reisch 2001; Sanne 2002; Tanner and Wölfling 2003; Press and Arnould 2009b) and leave consumers needing to find compromises. David and Margaret's experiences demonstrate practical examples of compromises lived to find a solution that is partly sustainable within an unsustainable consumption practice.

For example, David adapts his driving to his sustainability credo. His awareness of the characteristics of electric cars and his decision to participate in car sharing are a compromise:

“The worst is that you have to commute a long way to get to your work because that's a time inefficient way of working. It has an impact on the environment because of the transport that you are using to get there. So, I feel guilty in doing that. I moved here

recently. I didn't have a choice because that was where the job was, but I have chosen to live here and the two weren't matched. So, what I had to do was to make the best of getting to work. All of the guilt that goes with the impact of the car that I need to go to work is reduced by sharing my car with one of my colleagues. I was more interested in having a smaller car with the right kind of engine and pleased by that. I drive a car so I feel guilty about that. But I like to drive cars, it's good fun and it reduces my guilt because it is an electric car. So, you know, there are a lot of good things there. So, the two emotions balance each other out. The negative of having a car with the positive of the fun of having it, it's quite nice. And being able to pass these people in these big cars, who are now struggling filling their petrol tanks.” (David)

The competence to differentiate between different cars in terms of their emissions, engines and technologies allows David to choose the hybrid car as the alternative that best fits with sustainability. He experiences a clash between his positive emotional response to driving and his awareness of the environmental damage caused by the exhaust emissions. He decreases his sense of guilt by mobilising his competence. In essence, David reaches a compromise between necessity/fun to drive (the pleasure gained by driving and easily accessing his workplace) and his fulfilment of sustainability (minimising his effects on the environment by choosing an electric car and car sharing).

Like David, Margaret has a deep understanding of the different typologies of cars that are mostly aligned with sustainable principles. Understanding the different benefits of using a hybrid car / an electric car and a car running with vegetable oil allows her to adapt her driving to sustainability. In this way, competence helps her to cope with her dilemmas.

“A couple of years ago we were considering getting a diesel car, so that we can convert it to run on vegetable oil; but, then, there is this thing about knowing how to grow food to make oil to run our car. You know because, then, people will start to use the land to grow oil, not to grow food, so we didn't buy it in the end. We still have the same old petrol car but we run it on LPG, which is still petroleum but it has a lot less emissions and it's cheaper to run. But, it's still oil [she sighs]. Even if we were to get an electric car there is still lots of embodied energy in all the batteries and everything in an electric car. But, we still need a car because we do lots of things where we have to carry large amounts of things. Like on Sunday we had to go to the music festival and we had to carry two tables and the display boards. You know what is involved when you try to put on these kinds of events. So we do need a car but not just to go shopping, but for Transition events.” (Margaret)

Becoming engaged with sustainability issues reframes a practice, such as driving, in a new way. Consumers equip themselves with more knowledge of alternative approaches or commercial solutions in line with sustainability ideals to justify their engagement in practices that are not sustainable at their core. Thus, consumer competence plays a role in managing the incoherencies and difficulties that can potentially emerge in attempting to conduct a sustainable lifestyle. Finally, compromises may also occur in practices that are occurring over a long time span, as exemplified by David's travelling plans.

"We have earned enough points to do some big flights and we are building up for one in five years time. At the moment we are not going abroad and we tend to stay at home, we camp more and we tend to do a lot of more things in the UK." (David)

David and his family limit their flights abroad because of the carbon emissions produced by airplanes. This limitation of their travelling practices and camping in their own country, the United Kingdom, allows them to appreciate the amenities of their local environment as well as to support the local tourist industry. Engaging in reducing air travel for a long period of time represents a compensatory practice for David and his family and, in their view, justifies taking a long flight in the future.

7.5 Being Frustrated by the Organisational Barriers

Consumers identify problems in the functioning of the marketplace by mobilising their critical thought and being knowledgeable about production/distribution/disposal processes. In the case of James and Kate, they show a competence of dialogue with the stakeholders (Carù and Cova 2011; Cova and Cova 2012) and openly communicate their frustration to the market agents. For instance, both James and Kate feel unsatisfied by the excessive packaging in which products at supermarkets are wrapped.

"I get frustrated a bit with packaging because generally things are slightly over packaged and you can't really influence supermarkets. So, you have to buy, let's say, for example meat. At least half of the meat is in packages in supermarket X's; it is in plastic packs. Although I tried to contact the service to say why it cannot be switched, the answer is "no". (...) My impression is that they [supermarkets] are not interested to hear just one customer." (James)

"Another skill that I use is when I think that something is wrong and I can make a small mark about it. Then, I would do that. So, for example, I sometimes buy avocado pears... something that I buy only occasionally because they are always flown in but I really

like them, you know. They are often over-packaged. So, when I get to the till, I very often unpack them and I say: "I don't think that they should be in all this packaging. So, I am going to leave this here with you [cashier]. So, you can tell your manager that the customers think that they shouldn't have all this excessive packaging". And I take my avocados and go. If you do it in the right way, you can end up that the cashier agrees with you." (Kate)

Both of them 'vote' for sustainability by demonstrating a competent intent to shape the marketplace. They try to engage in dialogue with the retailers by demonstrating the unsustainable practice of over packaging fresh items. These findings add to the definition of consumer competence as well as to setting the boundaries of the concept of consumer voting (Shaw et al. 2006; Shaw and Black 2009). In fact, the informants, not only mobilise their knowledge to purchase, but also their skills allow them to criticise the offer side, as explained in subsection 6.4.2. As illustrated by Kate's actions, consumers vote for sustainability by "making a mark" when they observe a market practice conflicting with the principles of sustainability. That is, they vote not simply by boycotting sustainable commercial offers, but also by e-mailing retail managers or demonstrating with the cashiers to dialogue with the market.

The interpretation of James and Kate's experiences has revealed a sentiment of frustration towards the retailing side. The following analysis of Damini's consumption also highlights a frustration towards producers.

"We have an electric toothbrush. The instructions say that when it stops working, you have to remove the batteries to dispose of them safely to save the environment, which is good. But what it is bad, it is that in order to get the batteries out, the instructions actually say that we have to press it in a certain way which breaks the case. So, that it automatically means that it is not possible to replace the old batteries with new ones because to get the old batteries out you have to break the plastic. I don't think that it was necessary for them to do that, the same company made a shaver many years back where you could actually take apart the batteries and put in new batteries and put it back together again. Why can't they do that now? Manufacturers could encourage reuse for as long as it is possible and design it [products] in such a way that you can use it [them] for as long as possible. This would give rise to new types of industries where replacement and repair are possible for broken parts." (Damini)

"This is my husband's mother's sewing machine. So we are trying to reuse it. How old is it? Thirty years? Oh it must be. My daughter has decorated it with the stickers, I

think. And it is nicely built. It is solid metal which is why it has lasted so long. You look at the new ones in the shops and all this part is plastic. And they are flimsy, they move around; whereas this is very heavy and solid. And they [companies] can make it again if they want to. It is more expensive to make them in metal rather than in plastic. I feel really proud to use it.” (Damini)

Damini criticises producers that create goods which are not designed to last long and that cannot be repaired by consumers. She is, hence, frustrated by these short-lived disposable products that constitute an obstacle for her to be sustainable. Her experience sheds light on the impact of manufacturing practices that result in consumer deskilling (Jaffe and Gertler 2006) and she exposes the critical role played by manufacturers who place obstacles in the way of sustainability. She demonstrates how mass production practices may cause a domino effect. In essence, manufacturing processes creating throw-away products or goods that are irreparable commit the consumers to discarding them, whether they like it or not. A consequence of this practice, has been the rapid disappearance of repair services in recent decades (McCullough 2007, 2009; Dobscha et al. 2012). These matters reveal the systemic nature of sustainability (2.2), for it necessitates the cooperation of the different stakeholders (manufacturers, consumers and repair centres) (Spaargaren 2000, 2003; Röpke 2009; Shove 2010), if it is to be successful.

7.6 Counter-effect of Being Competent: Experiencing Indecision and Failure

In this section the difficulties experienced in conducting a sustainable consumption lifestyle are unveiled by showing the role played by consumer competence in the case of failed performance. The assumption that awareness of sustainability issues necessarily helps and positively supports consumers to live sustainably is questioned. The findings extend current understanding of the effects of information overload (Moisander 2007; Bartiaux 2008) by demonstrating how having more knowledge on a topic leads to questioning the good conduct of the identified practice, especially if consumers are exposed to contradictory information.

Subsection 7.6.1 concentrates upon interpreting consumers’ indecision in attempting to lead a sustainable lifestyle. That is, the indecision engendered by contrasting information and the problems in performing sustainable consumption lead consumers to question whether they are doing the right thing and consequently, they feel a sense of anxiety and incapacity (Shaw and Newholm 2002; Evans and Abrahamse 2009). High degrees of consciousness and knowledge can, therefore, represent an obstacle to the success of sustainable consumption and hence, perspective of the controversial role of knowledge (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Moisander 2007) is added to by the research findings. Subsection 7.6.2 enriches comprehension of the difficulties faced by consumers when striving to engage in a sustainable consumption lifestyle. It presents

the experiences of failures lived by consumers by being overwhelmed and incapable of consuming sustainably despite knowing that ‘what they are doing is unsustainable’.

7.6.1 Being Indecisive: The Reverse Side of Knowing

The informants openly expressed their difficulties in performing their sustainable practices. The descriptions of their consumption experiences are filled with expressions like “*it [sustainability] is difficult*” (Irene, David, James, Judith, Kate), “*it [sustainability] is complicated*” (Max, Irene, David, Judith) and “*it [sustainability] is not black and white*” (Tessa, Margaret, Judith). Judith defines how:

“It [engaging in a sustainable consumption lifestyle] is very complicated. If you go around a shop (...) if you try to think of everything it becomes very difficult.” (Judith)

Judith’s words reveal the intrinsic complex nature of sustainable and ethical consumption (Shaw and Newholm 2002), for in line with literature contributions, she expresses how challenging is to identify the right thing to do (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Bamossy and Englis 2009; Eckhardt et al. 2010). In essence, her words are echoed by the experiences of all the informants who concur that conducting a sustainable life can be a difficult process (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Press and Arnould 2009b). The focus of this subsection is to examine and interpret the role played by consumer competence when attempting to cope with the challenges at hand so to be able to materialise sustainability goals.

Firstly, Max and Damini’s grocery shopping experience is consistent with Carrington et al.’s (2010) explanation of the reasons why consumers have difficulties in shopping ethically, even though their purchasing practices are aimed at attaining environmental sustainability objectives.

“If I buy English tomatoes now, they are not very sustainable because in order to produce them you have to heat greenhouses. So, it's much better either not to buy tomatoes, which I do, or I often buy them from, perhaps Italy, where the climate is warmer. So, it is difficult to know which the best thing to do is.” (Max)

Understanding the production and conservation processes and product supply chain exemplifies the critical role played by competence in judging the marketplace. Max weighs up the advantages and disadvantages of buying local food grown in greenhouses as opposed to purchasing imported food. His knowledge, hence, plays a counter-role in contributing to his indecision on which purchasing decision to take.

This argument is reinforced by the analysis of Damini's practice of purchasing out-of-season fruits:

"I was told recently that more fuel is used to refrigerate fruits from the summer through to the spring of the next year than is spent in carrying the fruits from somewhere around the world at the right time of the year. You have two different ways of providing the out-of-season fruits. Travelling is less expensive, environmentally speaking, than the refrigeration route. You have to be a bit careful about what makes it expensive and what makes it cheap. Because if you make an expensive sort of move through long distances, you will actually improve the market for the less fuel efficient approach, so you have to be careful." (Damini)

In line with Max's concerns, Damini emphasises the difficulty to identify easily the most sustainable option available. She stresses the challenge to balance the different factors contributing for the practice to have a high or low degree of conformity to sustainability principles. Max and Damini's food acquisition practices reinforce the importance played by the dimension of consumer competence of judging the marketplace, as explained in subsection 6.4.2. Moreover, they extend it further by revealing how displaying multiple pieces of knowledge might be counteractive and bring about consumers' indecision.

The following quotes by Tessa and Judith help to expose the negative side of knowing, specifically in terms of social sustainability. A greater knowledge of growing processes and shipping practices, as well as their relative social/environmental consequences, can instil indecision.

"I was having a discussion a long time ago with somebody about green beans coming from Kenya and how ridiculous it seems because you can actually grow green beans here or much closer than Kenya. And the guy was saying to me actually that when he was out in Africa for one year, doing voluntary things, and that there are communities that depend on us to buy green beans. It might not be the ideal life for those people but with money that they get from green beans, it means a lot to them. So, if everybody suddenly stops taking green beans from Kenya, it would be an economic nightmare for them. You can't just necessarily say: "That thing is evil" and just stop yourself from doing it. You cannot condemn it just because you are right, because you don't know what repercussions there might be further down the line. You don't know the full story; it is just a small fragment of the world of consumers' things, but it is more complicated than I thought originally." (Tessa)

Purchasing beans from Kenya may be environmentally damaging because of the environmental cost of shipping them for long distances, but it can bring socioeconomic benefits for the farmers back to Kenya. In essence, Tessa experiences dilemmas when balancing the social and environmental effects of Fair Trade products. Having more competence, hence, may complicate practising sustainability further rather than supporting it. The dilemmas to evaluate the social and environmental effects of consumption are shared among the interviewees, as the following quote by Judith shows:

“We might want Fair Trade wine or we might want to buy wine from as nearby as we could. And most Fair Trade wines come from South Africa, which is quite a long way. But Spain is very much nearer but wines won't be Fair Trade.” (Judith)

As with Tessa, Judith reveals the difficulty to find her social and environmental sustainable principles combined in one single purchasing option, hence she feels indecisive and unsatisfied. Knowing the Fair Trade labelling system, its social beneficial effects and the harmful environmental consequences of shipping products leads to recognition of the controversial nature of purchasing its products (Shaw and Newholm 2002; Evans and Abrahamse 2009). These considerations reinforce the debate about the dilemmatic nature of Fair Trade in terms of the truthfulness of the benefits gained by the farmers and the communities adhering to the scheme (Arnould et al. 2009; Griffiths 2012).

Thus, the progressive evolution of consumer knowledge and critical thought can provoke a sense of incertitude and doubt to perform sustainability. The role exerted by competence of questioning the conduct of a practice underlines the limitations of the adoption of a decision-making perspective. Knowledge has previously been accused of not necessarily helping consumers to live sustainably (Schaefer and Crane 2005; Bartiaux 2008). As critically reviewed in subsection 2.5.1, the information deficit model is based upon the assumption of a simple linear relationship, where more knowledge would contribute to ease consumers' difficulties in engaging in a more-sustainable lifestyle. As has emerged from the experiences lived by Max, Damini, Tessa and Judith, defining consumer competence in terms of the information available is limiting and deterministic (Dolan 2002; Schaefer and Crane 2005; Moisander 2007). In sum, knowledge as a source of conflict and indecision strengthens the critiques of the information deficit model.

7.6.2 Coping with Challenges: Being Aware of Failing

This subsection reveals another dimension of the counter-effect of consumer competence. Having a broad knowledge about sustainability issues allows consumers to become judges of

themselves and to identify their failures. This point is supported by the interpretations offered by Judith and Irene of their experiences of failure.

“Sometimes when I have an aim in mind, I find that it takes me about a year to get that aim in place. I have to spend the first few months watching myself fail before I see how I can do it. So, I might say, I am not going to buy anything from China or I am not going to eat salt or to eat sugar whatever it is. Then, I see that I keep failing and I watch myself doing whatever it is that I was going to do until it happens and, then, I am doing it. So, it is a bit of that sort of zany zone thing when you play tennis you just watch the ball going in the wrong place. I don't play tennis but in terms of tennis you just watch yourself hitting the ball. And it is not going in. You just see that until it starts going in. I found that quite a useful idea because I saw that is what I do anyway. When I am trying to either give something up or take something on that I fail and it's important not to give up at that moment but just observe. I just go on through the end until somehow it will work, I expect.” (Judith)

“Fish feels like a necessary sort of protein but I know that ‘value’ smoked salmon in supermarket X's or supermarket Y's, which is very cheap, is farmed salmon. I know that it's not a good idea because farmed salmon harvest diseases which fresh salmon coming down the rivers pick up when they swim through the farms and it's not organically fed so it is not a sustainable system because it is polluting, and it is damaging the natural system in that area. But I so wanted to eat salmon that I bought it anyway and when somebody pointed out to me and I just said: “Shut up, I just want to eat this; I cannot have one thing that is nice and I like?” (she laughs). So that was for few months I did that; then, suddenly, I just didn't want to buy it anymore. It wasn't like, I didn't force myself to stop I just stopped wanting it. Maybe it is just reaching a point of maturity where you don't want it any more, it is not that your moral sense has overcome it consciously.” (Irene)

Both Judith and Irene's experiences reveal failures and difficulties trying to match up to sustainability ideals. Judith considers buying mass-produced clothes from China to be negative as their manufacturing processes as well as labour conditions most probably are not sustainable. Irene judges as unsustainable to buy farmed smoked salmon as it is grown in an unsustainable system. Although their competence makes them realise the downsides of their practices, both Judith and Irene take time to correct their consumption to attain their sustainability goals. Competence itself, hence, plays the role of the judge of both the informants. In essence, critical thought and knowledge of the environmental and social effects of their consumption makes

Judith and Irene become aware of their failures. They both allude to the tacit process through which their competence in knowing the damaging effects of their consumption contrasts with the emotional engagement in the practices. Judith and Irene took a long period of time to succeed in their interpretation of sustainability and they reveal that their process of fine-tuning their consumption requires patience.

Kate identifies the nadir of the potential reverse side of consumer competence.

“Sometimes you don't know and sometimes you know. I mean you can be a complete fanatic and I don't think it is helpful to be a complete fanatic. I think you just have to say: I want to tilt it as far this way as I can, without just kind of falling over and not being able to go on functioning.” (Kate)

Kate envisions an imaginary line beyond which attempting to extend knowledge about sustainability can be actually paralysing. Paradoxically, an excess of knowledge can lead to a risk of stopping to function.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter revealed how consumer competence plays a role in coping with the complexities of living a sustainable consumption lifestyle.

The first two sections (7.2 and 7.3) confirmed the nature of consumer competence as a value. The notion of consumer competence is, here, extended beyond the expertise to purchase. The interpretation of the findings contributed to highlight the social nature of competence. In fact, consumer competence is mobilised by the informants to ‘create community’. Informants themselves become embodied resources of competence for the effective spreading of sustainable practices. Therefore, the results contribute to extend the critics of the adoption of educational top-down initiatives (Bartiaux 2008; Evans and Jackson 2008). Consequently, grass roots initiatives are more effective as sharing of knowledge and skills occurs among “peer” consumers who are similarly engaged in the sustainability agenda. Moreover, the analysis of the results originated insights about the links between the concepts of competence and care. The boundaries of the definition of competence overcome the notion of product expertise (Alba and Hutchinson 1987) and craftsmanship (Campbell 2005) to regard the connection that consumers feel towards products. Being aware of the length of supply chains and being endowed with productive consumption abilities support in developing a sense of respect and connection towards products.

The last three sections opened the discussion of the competence of consumer competence by considering also its counter-effects. Performing sustainable and ethical consumption is complex in its own nature (Shaw and Newholm 2002) because inconsistencies and complications are ingrained at its core (Sanne, 2002; Tanner and Wölting 2003; Carrington et al. 2010; McEachern et al. 2010; Young et al. 2010; Hargreaves 2011). Sustainability, therefore, provides the perfect context in which to unveil the contradictory nature of competence.

The fully confident consumer seems to be a myth (Devinney et al. 2010; Eckhardt et al. 2010) and not a realistic representation of sustainable consumers. Knowledge and skills support informants to cope with the challenges and dilemmas that they face in their interpretation of sustainability. Moreover, competence represents a lens to shed new insights upon the interpretation of the structural barriers influencing sustainable practices (Tanner and Wölting 2003; Vermeir and Verbeke 2006). In essence, consumer understanding of the functioning of the marketplace fuels consumer frustration for unsustainable corporate practices. Finally, data interpretation contributed to develop the conceptualisation of the potentially negative role of consumer competence (Carù and Cova 2011). That is, a wide and deep knowledge on sustainability issues can actually have a reverse side by producing even more consumer indecision on the correct path to take towards sustainability.

8 DISCUSSION

8.1 Introduction

This study contributes to understanding the concept of consumer competence underpinning sustainable consumption practices. This chapter discusses the multifaceted and contradictory nature of consumer competence and its nuances. The complex nature of consumer competence is expressed in its conceptualisation as the combination of its three main dimensions: a. competence to judge the marketplace; b. competence to shape the marketplace; c. competence to manage resources. Moreover, the findings of this thesis shed light on the role played by competence when facing the complexities of attempting to live sustainably.

Section 8.2 reveals how this research contributes to framing consumer competence by extending the conceptualisation of being a competent consumer beyond the ability to be a savvy purchaser (Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Titus and Bradford 1996; Roberts and Manolis 2000; Nancarrow et al. 2008, 2011). That is, the concept of competence is framed by also considering its multifaceted and dynamic nature. Subsection 8.2.1 considers the evidence that counteracts the argument whereby competence is considered as a value by revealing how it can represent a source of disvalue for consumers too. More specifically, a reverse side of consumer competence is identified in the situation when being more knowledgeable hinders the performance of consumption by provoking indecision and the acknowledgement of failure. In so doing, a contribution is the understanding of the controversial nature of consumer knowledge (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Moisander 2007), whereby cognition may be misleading for consumers. Furthermore, the discussion of the reverse side of consumer competence extends comprehension of its contradictory nature beyond the conflicting role it plays in the relationship between brand communities and companies (Carù and Cova 2011). Subsection 8.2.2 justifies how consumer competence is an appropriate lens for investigating the relationship between production and consumption. The presented argument contributes to the literature on deskilling and reskilling (Selfa and Qazi 2005; Johar et al. 2006; Lamine 2008).

Finally, section 8.3 addresses the contributions of this work towards understanding the complexity when striving to accomplish a sustainable consumption lifestyle. More specifically, by unpacking the nature of the mobilisation of consumer competence so as to actualise sustainability goals this sheds light on the complex choices facing them. In particular, the study outcomes refute how sustainability has been mainly portrayed in the literature as involving a loss in pleasure, i.e. high levels of compromise in the conduct of a consumption lifestyle that lead to restriction and sacrifice. For to the contrary, through the lens of competence, the

outcomes show that engaging in sustainable consumption can represent a source of hedonism (Autio et al. 2009; McDonagh et al. 2012; Soper 2013).

8.2 Contribution to Theory: Reconceptualising Consumer Competence

The data interpretation of this study reveals the multifaceted nature of competence that supports consumers to attain their sustainability objectives. Consequently, a shift from the most commonly adopted definition of product expertise (Alba and Hutchinson 1987) is required to the one of consumer competence. That is, defining consumer competence overcomes the limits of considering this concept as a tool supporting consumers' purchasing decisions.

Multifaceted Nature of Consumer Competence

As presented in sections 3.4 and 3.5, contributions on consumer competence constitute two main literature streams. On the one hand, it is theorised as consumer knowledge to evaluate marketplace offers (i.e. Sproles et al. 1978; Alba and Hutchinson 2000; Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Adkins and Ozanne 2005a), whilst on the other it is conceived in terms of prosumeristic skills (i.e. Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Cova and Cova 2012).

The first stream considers competence as consumer knowledge of commercial products and the functioning of the marketplace (Berg 2007; Berg and Teigen 2009) and four main concepts can be bracketed under this focus:

- consumer sophistication (Sproles et al. 1978; Titus and Bradford, 1996);
- consumer expertise (Alba and Hutchinson 1987);
- consumer savvy (Roberts and Manolis 2000; Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Nancarrow et al. 2008, 2011; Uncles 2008; Garnier and Macdonald 2009);
- and, partly, consumer literacy (Adkins and Ozanne 2005a; Oswald 2011).

In particular, the concepts of consumer sophistication and product expertise represent the ability for consumers to be efficient decision makers, with the emphasis being on the updates of their degree of expertise and familiarity with product categories and brands. Their decision-making processes are also supported by their ability to maximise the use of technology and their literacy regarding the functioning of the markets and advertising mechanisms (Sproles et al. 1978; Berg 2007; Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Nancarrow et al. 2011). However, conceptualising consumer competence as knowledge to purchase efficiently is limiting in terms of grasping the complexity of this concept. In fact, adopting a cognitive lens of analysis concentrates the study of consumer competence on decision making processes and thus, restricts its definition to knowledge aimed at facilitating the purchasing phase of the wheel of consumption.

The second stream of research theorising competence as prosumeristic skills overcomes the limitations of the focus on purchasing of the previous research tradition. In this case, consumer competence is defined in terms of the consumers' skills required to cooperate with producers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000; Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Bonsu and Darmody 2008; Zwick et al. 2008) or become producers themselves (Campbell 2005; Fabris 2008; Cova and Cova 2012). Consumer artisanship, as the ability to display manual skills (Campbell 2005; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Carù and Cova 2011; Cova and Cova 2012), reveals how the nature of consumer competence is not exclusively connected to the sphere of consumption, but also to one of production. These perspectives concentrate on the productive nature of consumer competence as a source of collaboration with the corporate side (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; Beckett and Nayak 2008) or as a manifestation of a desire to behave as *homini faber* (Fabris 2008; Watson and Shove 2008; Moisio et al. 2013). As a result, the recent studies on prosumerism have mainly moved away from its mundane origins to concentrate upon particular consumption experiences.

In this study, marrying these two literature traditions is proposed by including in the definition of consumer competence both a dimension regarding judgment of the marketplace and one in relation to shaping the marketplace, for they both represent constituent parts of the multifaceted nature of this concept. As emerged in this study, consumers mobilise both of these dimensions of competence to accomplish their sustainability ideals. The dimension of judging the marketplace is informed by the first tradition of competence as consumer knowledge and refers to consumers' ability to purchase according to their consumption and life goals. The expertise in choosing among the various offers available in the market and the capacity to read and interpret marketing communications are complemented by consumers' comprehension of the production/distribution/disposal processes. At the same time, the capacity to shape the marketplace pertains to the art of doing, a craftsmanship that enables consumers to be producers of their own consumption as well as a craft art that supports them in being able to a dialogue and to compete with the offer side.

To complement the previous two dimensions of consumer competence, a third regarding consumers' ability to manage resources is proposed. It is contended that consumers manage their own resources and the ones that are available in the marketplace in pursuit of their consumption lifestyles, which thus sheds light on the difference between competence and resource in consumer behaviour. As explained in chapter 3, the HR management, strategy and education traditions highlight the difference between the notions of resource and that of competence. Competence is, in fact, conceived at a higher level compared to the one of resource, for it depends on having the capacity to manage the resource in question effectively

(Le Boterf 1994; Dolz and Ollagnier 2002). However, the relationship between these two terms has yet to be clearly demarcated in consumer research. Despite there being two types of resources identified in the cultural resource-based theory of the customer (Arnould et al. 2006a; Arnould 2007), 'operant' and 'operand', there is still a need to enhance the understanding between these two concepts in consumer behaviour. In line with the other disciplines, the findings of this study reveal the importance to include competence to manage resources as the third core dimension of this concept.

Framing consumer competence as the mobilisation of the three dimensions of judging the marketplace, shaping the marketplace and managing resources, hence, harmonises the differences encountered in the literature streams and allows for a more comprehensive conceptualisation of this concept. Moreover, this way of framing competence allows for understanding in terms of its productive nature and the role that it plays in all three phases of the wheel of consumption (purchasing, consuming and disposal). In fact, proposing the reading of consumer competence as the mobilisation of these three dimensions overcomes the limitations of focusing solely on a specific aspect of it, as displayed by the consumer during a particular consumption experience. However, being competent cannot be reduced to the mere possession of these three dimensions, for it requires an appropriate combination depending on the particular consumption context.

Dynamic Nature of Consumer Competence

As it has been demonstrated in the results, specifically section 6.6, consumer competence lies in the personalised mobilisation by consumers of the different dimensions and sub-dimensions of this concept. This does not imply that a consumer is expert in the same way in all the different dimensions, but rather that she/he combines her/his different types of competence to perform her/his consumption lifestyle. That is, the outcomes of this study highlight the importance of conceiving competence in its dynamic and combinatorial nature rather than as an addition of the elements possessed by the consumer. This approach helps to capture the overall and complex nature of consumer competence, in line with the interdisciplinary positions taken regarding this concept in the interdisciplinary literature (Allal 2002; Perrenoud 2002; Le Boterf 2011). As suggested in HR management literature, competence does not result from the addition of its elements but from their combination (Le Boterf 2008a) and by so doing, it is possible to notice the interactions occurring between the different dimensions. A practical example can clarify this point.

Engaging in a productive consumption experience, like producing homemade yogurt, reveals the mobilisation of the different dimensions of competence by consumers. In such

circumstances, the focal individuals demonstrate their crafting skills, which permits their engagement in forms of productive consumption, wherein they critically appraise the offers available in the market whilst pursuing their sustainability objectives. However, the informants would not be able to judge the commercial offers simply by adopting their craftsmanship background, if they were not knowledgeable about the products sold in the marketplace and their ways of functioning. Moreover, as consumers they mobilise their knowledge of product origins and characteristics to supply the raw materials (i.e. raw ingredients) that they will utilise to perform the productive consumption practice. Furthermore, they will need to manage their time and tools to accomplish their consumption project. Consequently, it is the appropriate combination of the three identified dimensions of competence: shaping the marketplace (in the form of craftsmanship skills), being able to judge it (in the form of the understanding of the production processes and knowledge of products) and managing resources, that is essential for comprehensive application of this phenomenon.

Consequently, in order to understand the adaptive nature of consumer competence is important to take into consideration its various dimensions that can influence each other and can be combined to accomplish different consumption experiences. Prior consumer behaviour contributions have mainly defined competence as an addition of different elements (Macdonald and Uncles 2007; Nancarrow et al. 2008, 2011; Uncles 2008). Following additive perspective, Garnier and Macdonald (2009) developed a scale of measurement to rate the degree of savvy of surveyed customers. Conceiving competence as an addition of components rather than according to a combinatorial perspective overlooks the interactions between the different elements (i.e. resource, knowledge, skills) and the role played by its mobilisation in a specific consumption experience. Literature studies that have, even indirectly, identified the link between different aspects of consumer competence for the accomplishment of a consumption practice represent contributions that accept co-production between consumers and producers (Moorthy et al. 1997; Auh et al. 2007). For example, Auh et al. (2007) identified the link between the dimension of consumer competence of judging the marketplace (product expertise and category) and the shaping of it (craftsmanship to collaborate with the corporate side).

A Consumer Culture Theory Definition of Consumer Competence

To sum up, consumer competence is defined according to its multifaceted and dynamic nature. From this study, it can be conceived as being mobilised by consumers to accomplish their life projects and hence, its definition is not restricted to the specific role played by the consumer (i.e. purchaser, prosumer, citizen) or in relation to a specific phase (purchasing, consumption, disposal). A competent consumer mobilises knowledge, skills and resources to accomplish her/his life projects. She/he combines her/his competence to judge and shape the marketplace as

well as manage market resources so as to obtain her/his consumption goals. The consumer does not need to be an expert in all the three identified areas to be competent, for she/he can personalise combinations of her/his competences according to the specific consumption experience and goal. In order to frame further the complex nature of consumer competence two specific aspects are revealed in the following two subsections: the counter-effect of consumer competence and competence as a means to blur the boundaries between consumption and production.

8.2.1 The Dark Side of Consumer Competence

The interdisciplinary studies on competence have depicted this concept as a source of value. Key competences support a company to gain market share and competitive advantage over its competitors (i.e. Penrose 1959). Moreover, being competent in handling tasks and projects in the work place is considered to be a source of recognition and accomplishment by employees (i.e. Le Boterf 2011). Similarly, competence is a source of value for consumers who acquire it to accomplish their consumption and satisfy their desires (Berg 2007; Moisio et al. 2013). It is, hence, conceived as an enabler for individuals to engage in different types of activities and to attain their objectives. The findings of this study have revealed a hidden side to competence challenges its enabling role of achieving goals. For as has become apparent, consumer competence can, in fact, lead to the destruction of value and not just its creation.

The research outcomes have revealed how competence can play a destructive role in the performance of sustainable consumption. As revealed in subsections 7.6.1 and 7.6.2, respectively, consumer competence can provoke consumer indecision as well as an acknowledgment of failure. That is, consumers who are highly knowledgeable about the social, environmental and economic effects of the consumption of specific products might find themselves caught by doubts and anxieties and hence, indecisive regarding the appropriate path to take. Consumer competence, in this case, leads to indecision and does not support adequately and smoothly the performance of the practice at hand. Similarly, consumers committed to the sustainability agenda might realise that a practice that they are conducting is ‘sustainably wrong’ owing to their competence in the subject. Consequently, competence acts as a source of misery for them, because it makes them aware of their human failings whilst striving to attain their sustainability ideals.

These results uncover an under theorised dark side of consumer competence and very few other researchers have identified this counter-effect. Carù and Cova (2011) identified co-destruction of value rather than co-creation of value when brand communities utilise their expertise and influence to create alternatives to the commercial brand offers arising from incomprehension

and lack of dialogue with the offer side. However, their identification of the competence of brand community represents a potential threat and a source of disvalue for the corporate side, but not for the consumer. That is, the competence of the brand community might be counterproductive for marketers in cases where problems emerge in that these can result in negative repercussions for the brands or the company's reputation. This research finding contrasts with that of Carù and Cova' (2011) in that it implies that consumer competence could be a source of counter value for those consumers who display it.

Furthermore, the elucidation of a reverse side of consumer competence enhances understanding of the contentious role of knowledge (i.e. Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Moisander 2007), whereby an excess of knowledge can actually lead to consumers' indecision rather than ease their consumption choices. This revelation demonstrates how the adoption of a decision making perspective to study consumer competence (Sproles et al. 1978; Moorthy et al. 1997) may well be erroneous. Moreover, it enriches the debate upon the distorting effects provoked by information overload on sustainability issues (Owens 2000; Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Moisander 2007; Bartiaux 2008; Connolly and Prothero 2008; Bamossy and Englis 2009; French 2009). Despite the centrality of consumer knowledge, it does not always necessarily facilitate the performance of consumption practices for it can provoke confusion; this finding from this study, therefore, discredits the assumption underlying the information deficit model (Burgess et al. 1998; Owens 2000; Hinton and Goodman 2009). That is, it brings into question the efficacy of education top-down activities organised to sensitise public audiences towards engaging in sustainability (Schahn and Olzer 1990).

Finally, identifying a counter-effect of consumer competence provides insight into the phenomenon of knowledge calibration (Alba and Hutchinson 2000; Johar et al. 2006; Burson 2007). This refers to a consumer's accuracy in being able to judge her/his knowledge as represented by the degree of correspondence between the knowledge that an individual thinks she/he possess and what is actually the case (Price and Feick 1984; Alba and Hutchinson 2000; Bertrandias and Vernet 2012). In sum, the notion of a reverse side of consumer competence, as identified in this work, pertains to consumers realising their failures when trying to achieve their ideals with the consequence being a decrease in their confidence in their capacity and hence, a failure in their knowledge calibration.

8.2.2 Blurred Boundaries between Production and Consumption: The Role of Consumer Competence

This subsection focuses on discussing the way competence represents a locus of both consumption and production. As emerged from the previous discussion on its multifaceted

nature, consumer competence enables individuals both to act as judges of the marketplace as well as active agents in shaping it through their productive consumption experiences. Consequently, the traditional division between consumption and production should be considered incorrect as the boundaries between the two are overlapping. Hence, when framing competence the evolution of the boundaries between consumers and producers as well as their relationships need to be taken into account.

Specifically, the hybrid figure of the prosumer (Toffler 1980; Kotler 1986; Cova and Cova 2012) displays craftsmanship skills to play both the role of the producer and that of consumer (Carù and Cova 2011; Cova and Cova 2012). Similarly, competence has been considered as a space for the manifestation of both consumption and production in co-production activities between consumers and producers (Firat et al. 1995; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Beckett and Nayak 2008). In collaborating with producers, consumers display their product and technical knowledge, which leads to improvement in the quality of the former's offer. As a consequence, they could become 'working consumers' whereby they direct their competencies towards the improvement of the offer and might end up paying a premium price due to the result of their 'labour' (Jeppesen and Molin 2003; Zwick et al. 2008; Cova and Dalli 2009). This means that the distinctive roles of the consumer, as the chooser, and the producer, as the creator, have changed (Beckett and Nayak 2008; Bonsu and Darmody 2008). Hence, it can be seen that the relationships between the different stakeholders of the marketplace are in a process of evolution (Jeppesen and Molin 2003).

The results of this study confirm the pleasure gained by consumers when mobilising their crafting skills to engage in productive forms of consumption. Mundane prosumeristic skills, such as cooking, gardening, growing, support their life projects. At the same time, contrary to the stream on consumer competence as a source of co-production between consumers and producers, the results reveal that such competence can lead to frustration, because of the inefficiencies of the offer side. It has emerged that consumers who are competent about sustainability issues feel disillusioned with the functioning of the market as they recognise that some market production techniques and disposal practices act as barriers to their own attainment of their sustainability goals. That is, owing to their knowledge background they are to recognise the unsustainability of certain market goods (i.e. products created to be destined to have a short life cycle), which leaves them frustrated or upset. This insight contributes to extend further the debate on the structural barriers constraining consumers' enactment of their sustainability credo (Tanner and Wölfling 2003; Vermeir and Verbeke 2006; Press and Arnould 2009b).

Moreover, the study findings counteract the assumption that all the consumers in the market arena are becoming more empowered and competent, thereby adding to the discourses literature on consumer deskillling and reskillling (Stanfield and Stanfield 1980; Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Lamine 2008). The data interpretation has highlighted how consumers committed to sustainability goals develop skills that allow them to have a direct experience of production and a higher connection with the products that they consume. This insight forges a link between the concepts of competence and care (O'Hara 1995; Shaw et al. forthcoming). In essence, consumers who have knowledge and skills about production processes attribute a higher respect to the products themselves and they avoid wasting them. For example, being able to grow produce and knowing the efforts that have gone into doing so results in the diminution of food waste, which thus confirms O'Hara's (1995) assertion regarding the links between caring and supporting the natural environment for the benefit of future generations.

Competence, hence, plays the role of reconnecting consumers with the production site a finding that extends the debate on consumer reskillling, because it confirms how productive consumption skills favour consumers' reconnection with production (Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Lamine 2008). In addition, the process of consumer reskillling results in consumers becoming more involved and knowledgeable about products. Reconnecting consumers with the production site leads to social benefits, such as preservation of local specificities and traditions (Iyer 1999; Selfa and Qazi 2005; Ilbery and Maye 2007). Making consumers aware of the local origin of goods connects them with the local area (Selfa and Qazi 2005; Ilbery and Maye 2007). Moreover, those who possess traditional craft practices can bring them to the space as dimension of competence, which they can apply to help embed a sense of community (Schau et al. 2009). In addition, it emerged that organising activities aimed at reskillling citizens allowed for the obtainment of environmental and social sustainability goals and their reconnection with their community and city.

To summarise, the findings of this study have elicited that when framing competence, not only should the role of knowledge and skills to support consumers' life projects be taken into account, but also how it acts as a linking value (Cova 1997) with other people sharing similar objectives. Thus, it is contended that consumer competence facilitates the success of collective initiatives by fuelling a sense of community, whereby it plays the role of linking value in an intangible form usually associated with possessing products. Moreover, sharing craftsmanship skills between citizens to embrace sustainability can be conceived of as an aspect of competence that acts as a facilitator of community bonds.

8.3 Living Sustainably: Actualisation and Extension

This study sheds new light upon the challenges lived by consumers when attempting to conduct a sustainable consumption lifestyle. Both competence and sustainability are characterised by an intrinsic evolutionary nature. That is, competence is always in the process of modification and improvement due to the continuous conscious and unconscious learning process experienced by the individuals concerned (White 1959; Deci and Ryan 2000, 2008; Ryan et al. 2008) and sustainability likewise (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Evans and Abrahamse 2009).

Adopting the lens of consumer competence deepens the comprehension of the ways consumers practice sustainability in terms of ‘maintained levels of consumption’ (Shaw and Newholm 2002; Fucks and Lorek 2005; Seyfang 2005, 2006; Cherrier et al. 2012) and ‘reduced consumption’ (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Shaw and Newholm 2002; Fucks and Lorek 2005; Shankar et al. 2006; Cherrier and Murray 2007; Cherrier et al. 2012; McDonagh et al. 2012). The analysis of the various dimensions of consumer competence in this work has confirmed the existence of these two alternative ways of leading a sustainable consumption lifestyle. Regarding which, the data interpretation has revealed that the informants have been constructing personal paths to attain their sustainability goals by engaging with both of these two approaches.

The analysis of the competence displayed to attain sustainability goals circumvented the limitations of the rational decision making models that have been usually adopted to analyse environmentally-friendly behaviours (Thøgersen 1994; Ölander and Thøgersen 1995). As explained in subsection 2.5.1, these models conceive competence according to a cognitive lens of analysis, with the concepts of perceived behavioural control (Ajzen and Madden 1986; Ajzen 1991) and ability (Pieters 1991; Ölander and Thøgersen 1995) being used as proxies for competence. Perceived behavioural control refers to people’s belief in their possessing the ability to perform the desired behaviour (Ajzen 1991) whereas ability is defined as a necessary condition for the implementation of motivation in performance (Pieters 1991; Thøgersen 1994; Ölander and Thøgersen 1995). Adopting decision making perspectives to studying competence entails its conceptualisation as a precondition for the performance of sustainable behaviours, which is limited as it does not grasp its multifaceted and contradictory nature. Hence, framing competence so as to take this into account in this study has allowed for this failing to be addressed. In addition, this research has responded to Carrington et al.’s (2010) call to develop further the concept of actual behavioural control as exercised by an individual in a particular situation (Ajzen and Maden 1986; Ajzen 1991, 2002; Carrington et al. 2010). That is, by developing the concept of consumer competence, this study has provided insights into the ways

consumers practically perform their sustainable consumption and consequently has overcome the highly conceptual abstract nature of the notion of actual behavioural control.

Thus, conceptualising competence in light of its multifaceted and dynamic nature has transcended the cognitive definitions of this concept and its usual association with knowledge. As a result, it has exposed the inadequacy of solely relying on educational programmes to disseminate the sustainability discourse. In fact, this work has highlighted how knowledge is just one of the components mobilised by consumers to pursue their sustainability goals, for craftsmanship skills and ability to manage resources are also important components that are involved. That is, the simple diffusion of information is insufficient to make individuals commit to the sustainability agenda, for it lacks the necessary practical application (Devinney et al. 2010; Eckhardt et al. 2010). In sum, this thesis has responded to an early call by Stanfield and Stanfield (1980) to direct attention towards an art of living and craft knowledge that go beyond marketing literacy.

The focus on an art of doing and not only an art of choosing is central to interpreting the engagement in sustainability according to the ‘reduced consumption’ discourse (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Shaw and Newholm 2002; Fucks and Lorek 2005). The outcomes of this study contribute to the understanding of the competence mobilised by consumers to pursue frugality (Lastovicka et al. 1999; Arnould 2003; Todd and Lawson 2003; Witkowski 2003; Pepper et al. 2009; Evans 2011) and to undertake voluntary simplicity (Leonard-Barton 1981; Etzioni 1998; Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Shaw and Newholm 2002; McDonald et al. 2006). The capacity to make time in their lives so as to be able to repair goods instead of throwing them away and the ability to engage in various forms of productive consumption facilitate consumers to attain a form of alternative hedonism (Soper 2007, 2008, 2013). The results of this work have, therefore, confirmed the theoretical affirmations by De Young (2000) who contended that:

“We might ask whether it is possible to reframe the intrinsic satisfaction categories of frugality and participation as issues of competence. In fact, both do contain the notion of developing skills and abilities useful in taking care of the planet, at either the global or the local scale. Frugality involves resource competence. Being proficient at making things last is reported by the study participants as a valued skill. Participation contains the theme of being effective at making a difference in one’s community. There is satisfaction gained from being capable of bringing order to chaos. Perhaps we might build upon the intrinsic satisfaction people gain from being competent at doing things that have a positive effect in a larger context and that matter in the long run.” (p.523)

In line with De Young (2000), this study highlights how the prosumeristic skills at the basis of conducting a frugal and a voluntary simplicity lifestyle bring pleasure and a sense of contentment to consumers. In fact, competence has a motivational nature because humans have an intrinsic desire to feel effective in what they do (White 1959, 1971; Deci and Ryan 2000, 2008; Fuller 2006). The informants highlighted the sense of pride and contentment obtained by their competent attainment of a sustainability goal. Thus, these results counteract the assumption that leading a sustainable lifestyle must necessarily translate in a gloomy and restricting path devoted towards sacrifice (Valor 2008). In reality, this research shows how consumers experience sustainability not only as a difficult adventure marked by obstacles to be overcome, but also as a hedonic journey considered as a source of joy and satisfaction. As such, this study has responded to the call to investigate the “hedonistic, pleasurable, or fulfilling benefits of being sustainable” (McDonagh et al. 2012, p.273) and in finding these present, it aligns with other research that has recognise consumer engagement in the sustainability agenda as a source of hedonism (Soper 2007, 2008, 2013; Autio et al. 2009; McDonagh et al. 2012).

Finally, this study contributes to the comprehension of the difficulties experienced by consumers when trying to live sustainably (Iyer 1999; Moisander and Pesonen 2002; Connolly and Prothero 2008). Challenges to perform a sustainable consumption lifestyle are linked both to personal and structural barriers (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002; Tanner and Wölfling 2003; Thøgersen 2005; Vermeir and Verbeke 2006; Connolly and Prothero 2008). In effect, the collective and systemic nature of sustainability requires a harmonious cooperation between the different stakeholders aimed at achieving the same overarching goal (Kilbourne et al. 1997; Iyer 1999; Dolan 2002; Spaargaren 2003; Söderbaum 2007; McDonagh et al. 2012). Consequently, the misalignment of one of the stakeholders from the sustainability path entails a domino effect regarding the other stakeholders’ abilities to achieve their sustainability objectives.

Previous studies have identified the lack of sustainable offers available in the marketplace as being a barrier to satisfying consumers’ sustainability goals (Tanner and Wölfling 2003; Press and Arnould 2009b). The outcomes of this study illuminate how consumers cope with this structural barrier thanks to the exploitation of their own productive abilities (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002; Tanner and Wölfling 2003; Thøgersen 2005; Vermeir and Verbeke 2006; Connolly and Prothero 2008). As shown in subsection 6.4.2, the consumers mobilised their craft knowledge and skills to create their own sustainable alternative offers to the ones proposed in the marketplace. Their homemade production was in response to their desire to minimise the effects on the environment of their consumption practices and their offerings were provided with the absence of packaging to go for waste and a low carbon footprint.

Consumer scepticism regarding the credibility of the marketplace offers affects their engagement in the sustainability agenda (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Prothero et al. 1997; Burgess et al. 1998; Owens 2000; Moisander 2007). In relation to which, many fear greenwashing corporate tactics and are overwhelmed by the potentially contradictory information to which they are exposed (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Bamossy and Englis 2009; French 2009; Horiuchi et al. 2009; Jahdi and Acikdilli 2009). Consequently, they look for reliable sources of information to help them decide which is the most sustainable alternative product or service. The results of this work confirm how individuals rely upon peers as sources of information, who are knowledgeable in a specific aspect of sustainability owing to their direct experience. Extant literature has defined interpersonal influence with reference to purchasing decisions; consumers look for a suggestion and advice from a known person or an expert before acquiring a good (Price and Feick 1984; Alba and Hutchinson 2000; Bertrandias and Vernet 2012). From this study, it is proposed that the concept of embodied resources should be used to define the role played by expert consumers, which refers to their influence exerted in all the phases of the wheel of consumption and not simply the act of acquiring a product (i.e. solar panel, energy efficient boiler).

In addition, consumers experience difficulties in performing sustainable consumption because they experience compromises rising from conflicts emerging in their everyday lives (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Tanner and Wölting 2003; Newholm 2005; Prothero et al. 2011). The findings of this research have highlighted how consumers adopt compensatory tactics to cope with their opposing goals and necessities featuring in their everyday routines. That is, they attempt to adapt practices that are in essence considered as being not sustainable (i.e. driving a car) to fit with their ideals and settle on a compromise that involves ‘greening’ their unsustainable consumption practices (i.e. acquiring a hybrid car).

8.4 Conclusion

The interpretation of the results of this study has led to the enhancement of the conceptualisation of consumer competence in consumer research. Competence has been framed according to its multifaceted and dynamic nature and as a tool mobilised by consumers to pursue their life projects. Being competent means to be able to mobilise creatively the knowledge, skills and resources possessed together with the ones offered by the marketplace. Three main dimensions characterising the multifaceted nature of competence have been identified. First, it entails a capacity to judge the marketplace by evaluating products offers and the functioning of the market. Second, it requires the ability to shape the marketplace by drawing on craftsmanship skills so that people become producers of their own consumption. Third, it pertains to the consumers’ capacity to mobilise their resources for the accomplishment

of their consumption objectives. This conceptualisation of competence highlights that its possession does not necessarily lead to value creation, for value destruction is also possible. That is, competence has a reverse side that can be counterproductive to the performance of consumption practices and the attainment of goals. Finally conceptualising competence must take into account its nature as a locus of both production and consumption.

With regards to the sustainability literature, the thesis outcomes underscore the complexity of leading a sustainable consumption lifestyle within the dynamics of everyday life. Moreover, the limitations of adopting a decision making perspective focused on the spreading of information to promote sustainability ideals have been overcome, by finding evidence that the concept should be conceived of as multifaceted and dynamic. Moreover, it has been ascertained that competence mobilised by consumers to engage in sustainable consumption in many cases involves combining both consumption practices aimed at reducing or maintaining consumption levels (Shaw and Newholm 2002; Fucks and Lorek 2005; Shankar et al. 2006; Cherrier et al. 2012). The comprehension of the incoherencies and doubts characterising the attempts to live sustainably has been added to by uncovering the compensatory tactics utilised by consumers, together with their feelings of frustration or sadness when confronted by unsustainable marketplace processes that have a negative impact on their own sustainability paths. Finally, attaining sustainability is conceived as a difficult journey but also a rewarding one, along which consumers experience also hedonic moments (Autio et al. 2009; McDonagh et al. 2012).

9 CONCLUSION

9.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the study implications, limitations and suggestions for future research projects. Section 9.2 discusses the implications of this research and in the first subsection (9.2.1) the potential of adopting consumer competence as a lens of analysis of interpretation is stressed. That is, it is contended that consumer competence represents an angle of inquiry that favours the understanding of the intricate nexus of meanings, motivations and practicalities experienced by consumers in engaging in a consumption phenomenon. Subsection 9.2.2 discusses the policy making implications emerging from this study, whereby these could benefit from the results of this research in relation to enhancing the materialisation of sustainability principles. For instance, organising practical activities that would strengthen local community bonds would enhance the possibility for the public audience to approach the sustainability agenda. Moreover, supporting organisations like Transition Bath would facilitate citizens' interest and engagement in sustainable actions because of the grassroots nature of these activities. Consequently, the authenticity and disinterested involvement of its active members would favour citizens' trust and feeling of community belonging. Finally, managerial implications regard the benefits for companies who make sustainability a central asset of their mission and offer to co-opt as their brand ambassadors consumers who are considered as sustainability "authentic opinion leaders" (Bertrandias and Vernet 2012), as the active members of the subculture considered in this study.

Section 9.3 shows the limitations of this study. Studying consumer competence within the dilemmatic and challenging path of leading a sustainable consumption lifestyle has allowed for the conceptualisation of a multifaceted nature of the concept of competence. However, no comparison with other contexts of analysis has taken place. Moreover, even although the focus is on studying consumer competence, no other stakeholders' views (i.e. marketers, policy makers) have been heard.

Finally in section 9.4, future research projects are envisioned. Searching for recognition and distinction is a human desire that has been widely investigated in consumer research as material possessions are considered as consumers' extended selves (Belk 1988). In view of an evolution towards a more intangible way of living and an appreciation for immaterial, a future research project could explore how consumers live their interactions with material and immaterial possessions and the role played by consumer competence in these experiences. The second project could investigate further the importance attributed by consumers to their consumption time and shed light on its consideration as value or disvalue for conducting their life projects.

9.2 Study Implications

The insights emerging from the analysis and interpretation of the data as well as the critical reflection on the literature contributions have generated the following theoretical, policy and managerial implications.

9.2.1 Theory Implications

The concept of consumer competence is at the core of this thesis. The findings of this study not only contribute to extending the definition of this concept in consumer research, as discussed in chapter 8, but also to highlight the potential of adopting competence as a research tool. In fact, as detailed in section 2.6, competence can be a lens of analysis used to unpack the complexity of sustainability. Moreover, competence as angle of analysis could also be beneficially employed to enhance understanding of marketing phenomena.

Utilising competence as lens of reflection facilitates the comprehension of consumption experiences as it overcomes the duality between ‘having’ and ‘being’ (Frey and Stutzer 2002; Shankar and Fitchett 2002; Abela 2006; Shankar et al. 2006; Gabriel and Lang 2008). The dimension of competence as ‘judging the marketplace’, as presented in section 6.3, reflects consumers’ search and evaluation for their ‘having’, whilst at the same time its utilisation by consumers to purchase also reveals the ‘being’ of consumers. For example, the sub-dimension ‘understanding production/distribution/disposal processes’ (subsection 6.3.1) reflects both consumers’ way of choosing their possessions as well as their beliefs and life convictions. Furthermore, competence can be an optic for understanding market phenomena. Regarding which, analysing the different webs of competencies utilised by each stakeholder to accomplish a common goal can shed light on the dynamics between them. Moreover, analysis of the competencies displayed by stakeholders could reveal problems between them, for example, fallacies in their communications. For example, the success of sustainable labelling systems depends on the combinations of the different competencies of producers, associations responsible for the labelling systems and consumers, as explained in subsection 6.3.3.

9.2.2 Policy Implications

The results of this study provide insights in relation to shaping public policies aimed at spreading the sustainability ethos and its application. Citizens’ engagement in the sustainability agenda could be encouraged through the organisation of public initiatives geared towards endowing them with practical skills. Thus, utilising competence to promulgate sustainability represents an important means by which to develop public policies.

This is in line with De Young's (2000) position affirming that:

“We should expect to find evidence that the urge toward competence is predictive of environmentally responsible behaviour.” (De Young 2000, p.522)

Creating public policies addressed at helping people to acquire skills that they could mobilise in their everyday lives is justified by the multifaceted nature of consumer competence identified in this study in the context of pursuing a sustainable consumption lifestyle. Consequently, the sole focus upon the diffusion of information fails to capture the complex nature of sustainability and hence, the study outcomes support the critiques of top-down educational campaigns that have been mainly relied upon hitherto to raise awareness about sustainability (Bartiaux 2008; Evans and Jackson 2009). As explained in subsection 2.5.1, the abstract spread of information about sustainability has been based upon the conviction of their being an information deficit. However, increasing consumer awareness about sustainability, although crucial, by itself does not necessarily translate into a behavioural change. In sum, adopting competence as a lens to frame public policies aimed at spreading sustainable beliefs and actions may represent an important strategy for structuring these policies.

In order to activate competence as the lever for action, it is important to involve citizens directly in shaping public initiatives and in participating in their implementation. Broadening their competence makes people feel that they are an active part in the process of spreading sustainability. This consideration is also supported by De Young (2003), who stated that:

“If we accept the urge toward participation as innate, particularly when calling upon one's competence, then we are well advised to use this inclination.” (p.162)

Thus, consumers should not only be the recipients of sustainability initiatives, for if the policy is to be effective, it is crucial that they take an active part in the process of framing public initiatives. A higher degree of engagement in policy making and its implementation by the general public is more likely to result in sustained long term benefits. For example, the informants of this research by engaging the local community in guerrilla gardening has informed them about sustainability through simple language and given them a tangible manifestation of their involvement, which is more likely to result in their continued participation than top down information provision. Moreover, they have acquired skills that they could use throughout their lives. Consequently, when framing a public policy is important to use a simple and clear language and relate with the everyday needs of citizens.

Consumer engagement in developing sustainable oriented initiatives is, hence, beneficial for their long term success. For example, Heiskanen et al. (2006) reported the successful results of projects involving consumers in envisioning commercial environmentally and socially friendly solutions. These were successful because the participants benefitted from the inputs and creativity arising from the interaction within various stakeholders. Combining different stakeholders' abilities and sensibilities positively influences policy making (De Young 2000, 2003; Heiskanen et al. 2006; Valor 2008). Every local community has a story and particular characteristics and mechanisms of functioning; involving the different stakeholders influencing a community's life would enable the capturing of the particular nuances of localism. Moreover, establishing local organisations, such as Transition Bath, provides opportunities for overcoming the difficulties of reaching out to a public audience and sensitising them to the sustainability agenda. People who are not necessarily at the heart of the sustainability are more likely to be interested in public events when they are addressed at bettering the local community (CSA, growing, planting with kids, etc.). It is, hence, important to capitalise on local knowledge:

“Useful knowledge is not exclusively held by researchers and practitioners. The knowledge held by citizens is no less applicable than ours. In fact, their competence with regard to local issues can exceed ours.” (De Young 2003 p.162)

Instigating sharing and a sense of community are, therefore, relevant for policy making. Sharing is generally moved by a core social motive and it is fuelled by a sense of belonging and community (Belk 2010), as it:

“builds up communities, makes people feel engaged in groups, redistributes resources, and brings a more human touch to everyday life. (...) Choosing sharing instead of monopolizing influences our personal well-being, tightens bonds, enhances social connection, and builds up a sense of macro-aggregate self, minimizing repercussions on the environment and improving collective well-being.” (Belk and Llamas 2012, p.643)

Recognising the role played by subcultures like the Transition Movement is important as such communities work as platforms for sustainability literacy (Stibbe 2009; Moraes et al. 2012). The success of the initiative ‘Open Home Weekend’ is an example of the cooperation of public institutions with environmental not-for-profit organisations, for the event was sponsored by Transition Bath together with Bath Preservation Trust and Bath & North East Somerset Council. Similarly, supporting community gardens can contribute to delivering collective shared goals held by local stakeholders. In general, communal use of a public space becomes a

means to fuel a sense of solidarity and sensitise the public audience (Chatzidakis et al. 2012) about local sustainable aspirations.

Public institutions, such as councils, that are keen to introduce reskilling initiatives (Jaffe and Gertler 2006; Gabriel and Lang 2008; Lamine 2008) to make citizens rediscover a craft could bundle their efforts with organisations such as the Transition Movement. These communities organise workshops and practical demonstrations to support members and non-members in the development of crafting skills that they could adopt in their households to lead a more sustainable lifestyle (Szmigin et al. 2007a; Moraes et al. 2010, 2012). To summarise, policy makers could frame their policies for sustainability in terms of community bonding. They could support and collaborate with organisations, like the Transition Movement, as the latter promotes respect for localism and biodiversity and hence, can influence the implementation of sustainability at the local level (Szmigin et al. 2007a; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007).

9.2.3 Managerial Implications

Consumers are sceptical of the trustworthiness of environmentally-friendly offers as they fear corporate green-washing (Hansen and Schrader 1997; Prothero et al. 1997; Burgess et al. 1998; Owens 2000). Consequently, brand managers need to address this by developing promotional strategies that communicate sincerely the sustainability credentials of their offers. An insight for promoting efficiently the authenticity of corporate commitment to sustainability emerged during the 'Open Home Weekend' event. As illustrated in subsection 6.5.1, the owners adhering to this initiative recommended the brands of products that they had adopted to accomplish their energy saving projects in their houses. During the initiative, leaflets and business cards of the company names and of the brands were available to be consulted and picked up. The people participating in the initiative asked for suggested brands and products to the owners. Consequently, Transition Bath active members played not only the role of sources of competence for people interested in knowing more about minimising energy consumption, but also promoters of the brands in question. Thus, they became 'authentic opinion leaders', who were trusted for their knowledge and expertise. Such a leader is "an 'efficient' marketing influencer, a purveyor of accurate beliefs. In this sense, he helps improve the welfare of his entourage" (Bertrandias and Vernet 2012, p.48). Another managerial challenge for companies that put sustainability at the centre of their activities is to incorporate ideals of product longevity and maintenance in their marketing strategies in order to demonstrate principles of sustainability in their production practices. As revealed in the results, the informants were attentive to purchasing long lasting brands and products despite their higher prices in comparison with the ones of cheaper competitors.

9.3 Study Limitations

This section presents the limitations of this thesis. Firstly, the theorisation of the concept of consumer competence might have been influenced by the specificities of sustainability as the context of analysis. Although the primary goal was to understand consumer competence, the second limitation of this study consisted in focusing on consumers' points of view and not investigating corporate and public institutional perspectives. Finally, conducting a longitudinal type of study would have been beneficial for this research.

Leading a sustainable lifestyle is a complex path characterised by challenges, incoherencies and doubts (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Newholm 2005; Moisander 2007; Connolly and Prothero 2008). The richness and complexity of pursuing sustainability represents a context of investigation favouring the analysis of the multifaceted nature of consumer competence. Because of the incongruences and difficulties ingrained in the essence of sustainability, sustainable consumption represented the perfect context to highlight the reverse side of consumer competence, as explained in section 7.6. Consequently, the contributions of the understanding of the concept of consumer competence, as revealed in the findings and discussion chapters, originated from the analysis of sustainable consumption experiences. However, these contributions might suffer from the weakness that the consumer competence concept was not analysed with reference to different contexts of analysis (i.e. health system; luxury), so as to ascertain the similarities and differences involved. That is, the specific characteristics of particular contexts of analysis may result in a different attribution of importance to the dimensions and sub-dimensions of consumer competence identified in this study. For example, when analysing the consumer competence displayed in the context of petrol consumption, the craftsmanship nature of competence is limited.

This exploration and interpretation of consumer knowledge and skills required to attain sustainability objectives focused upon their experiences, perceptions, and meanings. The interpretation could have been enriched by including the perspectives of marketers and public policy makers. More specifically, interviewing marketing managers, who are investing in sustainable branding, could have enhanced the understanding of the dimension of consumer competence in terms of judging the marketplace. Moreover, the comparison between managerial and consumer reflections and experiences could result in the identification of the difficulties faced by consumers when attempting to differentiate between environmentally-friendly offers (i.e. identification on the packaging of corporate adherence to sustainable labelling systems). This could have also resulted in the identification of stronger managerial implications. Similarly, analysing the perspective of public institutions officers, interested in skilling citizens so as to be able to meet the sustainability challenge, could have extended the

comprehension of the problems of formation and transfer of competence. Finally, the results of this thesis could have been reinforced by the implementation of a longitudinal study, but in view of time and geographical constraints this opportunity has not been viable. However, the observation over a long period of time of the evolution of the combinations and characteristics of the webs of competencies by the informants could have enhanced the understanding of the dynamic nature of consumer competence. Specifically, the observation over many years of the same informants could have highlighted whether some specific epiphany moments (i.e. marriage, birth of first child) represent a change in the toolbox of consumer competence to live sustainably.

9.4 Future Research

The results obtained by this study open up new avenues for future research to be conducted and I propose two potential research projects that I believe would provide beneficial outcomes for the field.

Competence as an Immaterial Object

The first project is with regards to the exploration and interpretation of the role played by consumer competence as a sign of distinction. Investigating consumer competence as a status symbol would provide the opportunity to shift the focus regarding the concept away from the well researched material consumer culture (Belk 1984; Ritzer 1999) towards the much less investigated immaterial perspective (Bardhi et al. 2012). A materialist culture regards the possession of goods and brands as means of distinction (Belk 1984; Ritzer 1999) and consumerism is characterised by a product attachment where materialist possessions are conceived as extended-selves (Belk 1988). That is, consumers use goods as mirrors of their real or projected identities and also as a coping strategy for their inner conflicts (Belk 1984, 1985, 1988; Ahuvia 2005).

Possessiveness is a key materialistic trait (Belk 1984, 1985; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Specifically, favourite possessions play a major role in consumers' projection of their own identity as a way to feel connected or to demonstrate differentiation from others (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988; Hansen and Schrader 1997; Ahuvia 2005) and hence, products represent means of communicating consumer status (Belk 1984, 1985, 1988; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988; Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Ahuvia 2005). However, the spread of new technologies has increasingly brought into question the importance attributed to the tangibility of consumption aspects.

The intangibility characterising the adoption of the internet, and technology in general, has resulted in immateriality becoming a dominant trait of consumer society, for as contended by Bardhi and Eckardt (2012):

“The consequence of this rise of the information and knowledge society is that value is increasingly reliant on cultural rather than tangible resources.” (p.883)

Consequently, consumers attribute value to intangible assets to cope with the increasing flexibility and practicality required to perform their lifestyles (Herbert et al. 2013).

The proposed project would involve adopting the lens of consumer competence to understand further the immaterial character of actual consumer society. As has emerged from the results of this thesis, some of the informants were considered as competent points of reference by people who were novices under the sustainability agenda, not in terms of what they produced, but rather in terms of intangible skills. Therefore, this insight gained through this thesis would be a good starting point to develop a research project aimed at specifically exploring the role of consumer competence as an intangible cultural resource in other contexts, which would shed further light on the evolution from a material culture to a more immaterial one that Western societies appear to be engaging with.

It would be interesting to conduct this project in multiple substantially different contexts, such as technology and cosmetics. A technological context would allow for exploring the representation of immateriality at its peak owing to its increasing virtual nature. This choice is also justified by the existence of a few research studies (Meuter et al. 2005; Fuller 2006), that have identified the search for recognition as a drive pushing consumers to share their technological expertise and discoveries online. The cosmetics industry would be an appropriate context as its products and brands convey consumers' status. Moreover, consuming cosmetics necessitates both of the possession of products as well as the skills to apply them and use optimally.

Investigating the extent to which competence is valued as an element of distinction and the emotional benefits obtained with it could shed light upon the balance between 'having' and 'being'. This is in keeping with the suggestion offered by Shankar and Fitchett (2002), who believe that marketing efforts should be directed towards offering adequate resources and technologies, which support consumers in obtaining and retaining gratifying states of being.

Consequently, such a study would provide evidence to address the question posed by Shankar and Fitchett (2002):

“Can the states of 'having' and 'being' really be expected to occupy discrete conceptual categories rather than constituting a common root meaning? Is it not the case that a state of 'having' is also a state of 'being'; that is, consumption can be understood as 'being in' a continual state of *'having-ness'*?” (p.506)

Interpreting the possession of competence as an immaterial object of distinction could extend the comprehension of the ways consumers conceive materiality in an era where immateriality is highly valued.

Consuming Time

The second future project would be directed towards deepening the understanding of the resource of time in consumption. The results of this thesis have demonstrated how managing time is crucial for leading a sustainable consumption lifestyle. It would be interesting to extend comprehension of the value consumers attach to the resource of time and their capacity to manage it within different contexts of analysis. The project would be tasked with investigating whether time is considered as a value or a disvalue for consumers when performing their consumption practices, thus contributing to the conceptualisation of time in consumer behaviour, a research field already widely travelled (i.e. Graham 1981; Cotte et al. 2004; Brewis and Gavin 2005; Mogilner and Aaker 2009). More specifically, the study would probe how time is valued by consumers and what are the conditions under which they appreciate a higher or lower time for consumption. Moreover, I believe it would be worthwhile to understand the value that consumers attribute to their managing of time as a character trait of themselves that they present to others. This would extend the work by Brewis and Gavin (2005), who found that having little time to cook can be actually perceived as a high status marker because it reflects a prestigious career.

9.5 Conclusion

This thesis contributes to the consumer research literature by proposing a reconceptualisation of the concept of consumer competence. This concept is usually utilised in consumer behaviour in terms of consumer knowledge to purchase effectively and being aware of the functioning of the marketplace (Sproles et al. 1978; Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Titus and Bradford 1996; Berg 2007; Berg and Teigen 2009). This study furthers the understanding of consumer competence by highlighting its multifaceted nature. That is, consumers mobilise different dimensions of consumer competence to accomplish their consumption goals and it is in the interplay between

the combinations of these dimensions that the dynamic nature of this concept lies. Specifically, this research has contributed to identify the existence of a reverse side of consumer competence, for although being competent has always represented a positive value, negative aspects have been uncovered through this work, whereby competence in pursuing sustainability can lead to indecision and acknowledgment of failure. Furthermore, this research has extended the understanding of the complexity of accomplishing sustainability within the dynamics of everyday life. The interpretation of the results has provided evidence for countering the argument that sustainability is mainly perceived as a state of deprivation and sacrifice by extending its essence to take into account the hedonism gained from its pursuit (Soper 2007; Autio et al. 2009). Consumer research traditionally conceives products and brands as extended-selves (Belk 1988) and as means of linking value between consumers (Cova 1997), which has resulted in tangible signs of recognition being at the centre of this scholarship. In view of the increasing intangibility of consumption, it could be the case that mobilising consumer competence will become the main source of the extended-self in the not too distant future.

Appendix - Descriptions of the Interviewees

This section presents the description of the interviewees in relation to their socio-demographics and their approach to engaging in a sustainable consumption lifestyle. As contended in the subsection 5.3.2, all of them were assured of anonymity and consequently, any identifying details have been removed or disguised. Moreover, attention to respecting respondents' confidentiality is particularly crucial owing to their involvement in the Transition Bath groups and activities. The informants are, in fact, easily identifiable because of their participation in this subculture. As a consequence, the following descriptions are aimed at presenting the informants without revealing any detail that could betray their identities. Interviewees are all referred to by pseudonyms and so as to assure their privacy, general occupational category rather than a specific job description is provided. Furthermore, their specific role in the subculture is not revealed as it will automatically expose their identities.

Adele

She is in her fifties, married with one son and she holds a degree in a specific branch of medicine. Taking care of her surroundings is a trait ingrained in her life owing to her work in the health system. That is, her life projects, both professionally and personally, are geared towards caring for the wellbeing of near and distant others, the environment and the local community where she lives. As interdependence is really important to her, she believes in mutual exchange and sharing. Her expertise in sustainability, in fact, derives from a long term incremental process of education informed specifically by her son. She consciously plays the role of an 'evangeliser' of principles of sustainability by her knowing about the effects that certain practices exert on the environment. Her craftsmanship skills were acquired during her childhood and early adulthood, such as preserving fruits and vegetables.

Brigitte

She is in her thirties, in a relationship, but she does not have children, holding a high-school diploma in languages. Her curiosity and thirst for living new experiences has led to her spending most of her life travelling. As a result, she has been exposed to different cultural and geographical contexts. She comes from an upper middle class family, but she decided to live a voluntary simplicity life. Consequently, she has preferred to limit the time she dedicates to working and she is a seasonal worker. Her natural inclination for questioning the status quo reflects her interpretation of sustainability at the borders of the marketplace. Skip-diving and participating in the 'occupation movement' are two practical manifestations of her critical thought and her connection with products has been informed by the direct experiences that she had during her trips in Latin America and Asia.

Damini

She is in her forties, married and has a young daughter. She holds a master's degree in information technology. She used to work in the technology industry, but decided to be a stay-at-home mum to care for her family. However, she does not exclude the possibility of going back to work or starting a new career. Her expert craftsmanship skills (cooking, sewing and gardening) support her in materialising her sustainability ideals. She continually tries to improve her competence to lead a sustainable lifestyle by: a) attending classes and workshops where she learns new craft skills; b) reading technical manuals and books; and c) researching constantly online.

Irene

She is in her thirties, single and holds a degree in psychology. She works for an environmental organisation, for which she does both paid and voluntary work. Her involvement in sustainability started from an early age and over the years she has developed her practical abilities to perform sustainability, in particular, by volunteering in 'willing workers on the organic farms' scheme (WWOOF). She declares that her respect for animals, the environment and other people guides each step that she takes in life. She also believes profoundly in the power of community. Consequently, she is highly engaged in guerrilla and community gardening activities to sensitise the public audience towards sustainability.

David

He is in his forties, married with two children. He has three degrees (environmental science, architecture and urban design). He is registered as an architect and an urban designer. He participates in urban design projects tasked with regenerating neighbourhood areas and in addition to pursuing environmental goals, these projects are aimed at re-establishing a community life in the neighbourhood. Hence, they also encompass the improvement of transport connections. He shares his interest in sustainable design with his wife and friends, who are also working in the urban design industry. His passion for sustainability influences also his personal life projects. In fact, he has accomplished the ambitious project of making his house optimally sustainable by such actions as installing energy efficient appliances, insulation and solar panels, amongst other green practices. Moreover, he and his family try to meet sustainability principles in their everyday consumption practices.

James

He is in his sixties, single, with an academic background in engineering and finance; part of his degree is in sustainable energy. He is semi-retired and he undertakes some consultancy projects. In particular, he puts himself forward as a volunteer to help in reducing the energy use in public

buildings. He conceives a sustainable lifestyle as a path directed towards the minimisation of the waste of resources. His technical background informs his capacity to envision energy saving solutions. Furthermore, his engineering knowledge strengthens his ability to use at the most energy-efficient appliances, such as energy monitors.

Judith

She is in her seventies, married and she has a large family with children and grandchildren. She has been throughout her life a stay-at-home mum. She has conducted a frugal lifestyle, being attentive to limiting any type of waste. She has improved her craftsmanship skills throughout her life project, devoting much time to cooking, sewing, and knitting. Moreover, she shares her passion for gardening with her husband and they both grow their own vegetables. She has extended her competence to live sustainably by attending courses on permaculture and a year-long course on sustainable development.

Kate

She is in her sixties, in a relationship and has two children. She has a PhD in social sciences and has worked in human resources management throughout her career. She also participates in various volunteering activities. She has experience of both top-down and bottom-up activities aimed at raising public awareness about sustainability. However, she firmly believes in the efficiency and strength that derive from grass roots initiatives, which is why she has become highly involved in guerrilla gardening activities.

Margaret

She is in her fifties married and without children. She has a high school diploma. She is a dog sitter. She shares her engagement in sustainability with her husband. They conduct a voluntary simplicity lifestyle because they have decided to scale-down consumption and reduce their working hours. Consequently, they focus their energy on developing their self enhancement and in expressing their creative potential in engaging in craftsmanship practices. Her cooking and gardening skills result from the influence exerted by her mother and her participation in workshops.

Max

He is in his sixties, married with children and holds a degree in management. He is retired and he has had a corporate career. He likes surrounding himself with beautiful possessions. His lifestyle reveals an interpretation of sustainability within maintained levels of consumption. His engagement is particularly concentrated on preserving local traditions and varieties of fruits and

vegetables. The competence that supports him the most in conducting his sustainable lifestyle is represented by his growing skills and knowledge of the agricultural processes of production.

Michael

He is in his fifties, married with two children and he works in the editorial industry. He is a firm believer in the application of permaculture principles to shape personal and collective projects. He has developed an eco-consciousness specifically aimed at saving energy consumption. His aversion to waste and consumerist consumption guides his consumption decisions. Consequently, his lifestyle is based upon a refusal to possess unnecessary goods. Furthermore, he is actively involved in any initiatives that favour the development of a sense of community.

Owen

He is in his seventies and married. He is the head of a large family with four children and several grandchildren. He has a high school diploma. He has a natural predisposition to care for his immediate and distant surroundings. His career has been devoted to caring for the others as he has worked on welfare programmes. He believes in the power of community to drive the change towards the establishment of a more-sustainable society. His expertise particularly lies in energy conservation, specifically insulating and draught-proofing practices. He has inherited from his parents a frugal lifestyle and abhorrence for waste.

Rose

She is in her sixties, married and has a daughter. She is an artist, with a high school diploma in art. She leads a voluntary simplicity lifestyle, whereby she tries to minimise her consumption and engages in productive consumption activities. She has a passion for gardening and is highly involved in promoting guerrilla gardening initiatives, spending a lot of time to taking care of the guerrilla gardens.

Stephen

He is in his twenties, single and studying theology at the university. He leads a voluntary simplicity lifestyle. He could be defined as a holistic simplifier because he minimises his consumption to commit to a “simpler life” (Etzioni 1998). His education informs also his scope for self-enhancement and he conceives his engagement in sustainability also in spiritual terms. He improves his knowledge of sustainability issues by reading the biographies of people who live their lives by the principles of sustainability. Stephen’s growing, cooking and cycling skills contribute to his toolbox of competence to lead a sustainable lifestyle. Moreover, he engages in foraging and skip-diving.

Tessa

She is in her thirties married and without children. She works in the publishing industry and has a degree in anthropology. She shares with her husband an aversion to any kind of waste and for this reason she always try to extend products' life cycles by reusing or recycling them. Her lifestyle is also influenced by a passion for art and a belief in a free expression of creativity. Artisanship is Tessa's ethos and she engages in a variety of crafting practices (cooking, mending, sewing and growing). She firmly believes in the impact of craft skills to conduct a sustainable way of life.

Tom

He is in his sixties, married with children. He holds a university degree and is retired. His interest in sustainability was reinforced in recent years when he realised that his household was using more energy than was necessary. Then, he decided to investigate further ways to reduce it. He has invested time and effort to improving his knowledge on energy saving methods. In particular, he has installed low carbon technologies to improve the energy efficiency of his house.

Veronica

She is in her sixties, single and has a PhD. She is now retired after a long and intense career. Her frugal lifestyle derives from her family traditions. Consuming locally sourced groceries, mending clothes as well as preserving are skills that her family engaged in during her childhood. She believes in the power of community to drive the change towards a more-sustainable society.

William

He is in his sixties, married and has a daughter. He holds a degree in architecture and is now retired after a career as a sustainable architect. His lifestyle is devoted towards avoiding any kind of waste. Specifically, his educational and working background support him in finding solutions to minimise the use of energy in his house. He converted and refurbished the different houses in which he has lived throughout his entire life. His propensity towards saving is reflected also in his attentive evaluation of price/quality ratios geared towards selecting commercial offers and purchasing sustainable alternatives.

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